

BORIS GORBATOV

Donbas

A NOVEL

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DONBAS

A Novel



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БОРИС ГОРБАТОВ

Донбасс

РОМАН



ИЗДАТЕЛЬСТВО
ЛИТЕРАТУРЫ НА ИНОСТРАННЫХ ЯЗЫКАХ

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THE POETRY OF LABOUR

THE Stakhanov movement is one of the most stupendous and sweeping movements of the modern age. Starting at the Central Irmino Colliery in the Donbas, it quickly assumed nation-wide scope and demonstrated to the world what immense creative powers lay dormant in socialist society. The first initiators of that great historic movement were followed, in the words of the *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union*, by "other pioneers, whole battalions of them, who surpassed the productivity of labour of the earlier pioneers." The initiative of the Donets coal-hewer Alexei Stakhanov, and prior to him, of Nikita Izotov, was seized upon by men and women of various professions—weavers and steel founders, farriers and mechanics, engineering workers and engine drivers. "The Stakhanov movement represents the future of our industry," Stalin said at the time. The old notions concerning output rates, technique and designed capacities were overthrown and swept away by the new re-vitalizing torrent; progressive ideas triumphed over conservatism, the new gave battle to the old.

This remarkable period is described by Boris Gorbатов in his novel *Donbas*. Through the lives of two collier lads and their mates from the Steep Maria coal mine, the author has succeeded in showing the profound changes which took place during those years among the Soviet working class.

* * *

The leading characters of the story are Andrei and Victor, two inseparable friends from the rustic little town of Chibiryaki. Their path to fame was a tortuous and thorny one. They experienced everything—fear of the pit, the inevitable difficulties of the novice, and inability to adapt themselves to strict work discipline. Victor Abrosimov was driven to such an extremity that he even made up his mind to leave the Steep Maria colliery. However, the loyal friendship of Andrei saved him from that shameful act. Andrei

Voronko overtook his friend at the railway station and persuaded the runaway to go back to the colliery. These trials and difficulties tempered the hearts of the two young miners.

The boys did not feel lonely. They had many kind friends and teachers—Uncle Onisim, who had given his whole life to the mine, the Komsomol organizer Svetlichny, a restless well-meaning soul, who makes everything his business, the never-aging Prokop Maximovich, who unstintingly shares his rich experience with the young people, the Party organizer of the colliery Nechayenko, who carefully and lovingly guides the boys in their new difficult life. Surrounded by the solicitude of all these people, Andrei and Victor mature, acquire confidence and experience.

Andrei Voronko's and Victor Abrosimov's fight to introduce new work methods forms the pivotal theme of the book. There are no indifferent bystanders or outsiders in this struggle. We meet passive opponents such as engineer Glushkov, and direct enemies of the Stakhanov movement, such as Rudin and Makivchuk. Victor Abrosimov, however, proves his mettle at the working face, pneumatic hammer in hand. His work record is challenged by dozens of his friends at the Steep Maria and other mines in the Donbas coal-fields. The echoes of his hammer reverberate throughout the country. Obviously, this eager desire to give battle to the old had long been ripening among the masses. "It was as if everything around had suddenly been set in motion, had torn away from its moorings and shot recklessly forward, sweeping all barriers before it, bursting all flood-gates and opening up to men such sweeping boundless horizons that it took one's breath away."

The daring dreams of these brave determined boys come true. Their names become famous throughout the Donbas. Andrei and Victor attain their heart's desire when they leave for Moscow with a delegation of Donbas notables. Their train steams into the great city, and the miners, deeply thrilled, breathe in the familiar odours of coal that assail them at the Moscow railway station. "'Well, now!' Victor cried joyfully, jumping to the platform. 'It smells of coal!'" The capital gives its honoured guests a warm welcome. The miners gaze spellbound at Red Square, which they had seen before only in their sleeping and waking dreams.

But the most memorable day of Andrei Voronko's sojourn in Moscow was the occasion when the young miner was invited to

the Kremlin and received by Stalin. "He felt at that moment that Victor, and Prokop Maximovich and the Old Man, and Uncle Onisim, and Mitya Zakorko, and Dasha, and all the Communists, all the miners, all the people of the Steep Maria were pressing Stalin's hand together with him. It was in their name that he, Andrei Voronko, the Party Secretary of the Steep Maria, was shaking the hand of the General Secretary of the Bolshevik Party. Stalin discloses to Andrei the future of the Donbas. Never, as long as he lived, would Voronko forget that friendly talk with Stalin, that simply-furnished study and the Kremlin buildings outside the window silhouetted against the sky. The pages describing this meeting between J. V. Stalin and the miner Voronko are the most stirring and powerful in the book.

This novel about the Donets land and its remarkable people is written with real affection and tenderness. One cannot help admiring the character study of the grey-haired old collier Prokop Maximovich, who, speaking of his antecedents, claims with full right: "We may not be aristocrats, but we remember our roots! *We* sank these shafts here, *we* gave life to this steppe!" The reader will find another interesting character in Sergei Ocheretin, a mischievous scapegrace who makes good under the influence of stimulating work and the sympathy of his miner mates. Mitya Zakorko, a lad with flaming-red curly hair, who will not yield the palm to his rival, Victor, either in work or in dancing, is a likable character. Dasha, the collier girl, who once worked in the pit as lamp carrier, for which the miners christened her "Fire-Fly," is portrayed with humour and sympathy.

The chief characters of the story—Abrosimov and Voronko—are shown in dynamic development.

The Donets landscapes are exquisitely rendered—the steppe, mingling its odours with the smouldering waste dumps, the disquieting blazing sunsets with scudding clouds and the spring moonlit evenings. Man is ever present in Gorbатов's landscapes, which are warmed by human breath and toil, by man's love for this austere land, the face of which he is ever changing and improving.

This book, describing the lives of the Komsomol youth in the 'thirties and helping to mould the characters of the young builders of communism, enjoys tremendous popularity among Soviet readers.

Book One



TWO FRIENDS



* 1 *

THERE were two friends. One was called Victor, the other Andrei. In 1930 their combined age was thirty-five.

"The leaves are fading," Victor said ruefully, pointing to the Psyol and the yellow maple leaves floating downstream. "Time we made up our minds, old chap."

Andrei shrugged his shoulders and said nothing.

They looked with lingering envy at a broad scalloped maple leaf rocking and spinning on the water as it sailed down, ever down to the sea. It sailed on, while they remained.

They were the same age, they lived on the same street, had sat at the same desk in school, used the same school-books and shared the same pigeons and dreams. It never occurred to them that they might have different paths in life.

"We've got to go, we've got to!" they told each other morning and evening. But they did not stir.

They lived in Chibiryaki, a small town on the river

Psyol. They were born here—Victor in a little white hut under patterned tiles, Andrei in a sky-blue one under a green-painted iron roof. They grew up here. Ran about over this grass. Gazed at these stars. And now they had decided to leave it—for good and all.

“Why don't you want to join the navy, Andrei?” Victor said moodily. “A sailor cruises the high seas, old chap!”

They had never seen the sea, nor for that matter any big river or big city. They had seen a four-storeyed house only on the cinema screen.

All their seventeen and a half years they had lived here, on this street. There it was—one wattle fence running into another. All overrun with weeds—goose-foot and dock. A dry silvery dust streamed from the goose-foot.

No motor vehicle ever drove down that street, and even carts creaked here rarely, for it stood well back from the main road. Here the wheel ruts never ran out into the luring distance, but turned off sharply into the yards, as if all the world's roads led to the cow house and ended at the barn-yard.

“We might even fix up on a submarine,” Victor said. “Why not? We're able-bodied fellows. What do you say?”

The street they were born in was all orchard, front garden and kitchen-garden. The orchards here were luxuriant, heavy with fruit, the wattle fences in good repair, the kitchen-gardens well-kept, weeded and lovingly tended, and the hollyhocks growing under the windows were full-blown, pink and fleshy, like proud buxom country girls ripe for marriage. Their little huts were completely buried in the exuberant foliage. They were scattered about the place haphazard, as if the only thing that mattered on this street and in this life were the orchards and gardens and not the houses. The houses were blink-eyed little clay huts, all alike, except for the cap-like roofs,

a few of which were made of iron, some of tiles, but most of straw thatch, trimmed short like a Cossack haircut or covered with grey mouldering reeds. Such roofs are a favourite nesting place for storks. The stork is said to bring luck. There were lots of storks in this street. In the evenings they lined up on their roofs like sentinels, standing there on one leg, grave and important, as though guarding the luck they were supposed to bring people.

"No!" Andrei said quietly. "I don't want to be a sailor."

"Then what *do* you want, Andrei?" Victor exclaimed testily.

Victor had no father. His father lay in the public garden, in a common grave, right in the centre of the town. He had been a Bolshevik. And almost every Sunday, on her way home from market, Victor's mother brought a small wreath of flowers to the grave, shed a few customary tears, and laid the wreath carefully at the foot of the tombstone. It was a common grave, and this had always disconcerted Victor's mother. Even after death her husband did not belong to her—he lay with his comrades.

She was a good simple woman. She had loved her husband with a timid love and feared him, and now she loved her son and feared him too. He grew up to be a sturdy, headstrong and impetuous boy, like his father. His mother was beginning to feel that their little home had become stuffy and irksome to him. Soon he would fly the nest. She was already embroidering towels and shirts for his journey, and weeping over them.

"What about going to study?" Andrei timidly suggested. "There are lots of school warrants at the Kom-somol Branch."

"Study?" Victor snorted. "Haven't you polished enough school benches with your trousers? Oh, all right, if you're not keen on the navy, let's go to a flying school."

Andrei had a father and mother. His father worked at the steam mill as engineer, and little Andrei used to think

him a wizard. Of all the floury workmen at the mill he alone was black; he alone had that unfamiliar sweetish smell of petrol and machine oil about him, and he alone was able to control that marvellous thing—the engine. Andrei was proud of his father and secretly pitied him.

Andrei's father was fond of talking about his past life. He was good at it. All his stories opened with: "That was before I got married." His youth had been a brief but rollicking period of travel and adventure. He had sailed before the mast, worked on the railways and been in many towns and ports. He had always "had to do" with machines. His hustling life had been steered by the oil engine. Then he suddenly married and settled down here. His stories usually ended with: "And then I got married." The rest was uninteresting, not worth mentioning.

Andrei thought he understood his father—he was not a happy man. Sometimes he felt like going up to him and saying simply and sympathetically: "Look here, Dad, let's get out of this. Eh? Just you, I and Victor—sling a knapsack on our backs and off we go!" But he never did. His mother would have raised an outcry! He was a bit afraid of his mother.

Andrei's father certainly did not look like an unhappy man. He seemed to find a source of amusement all round him—in himself, his wife, the neighbours, but it was a good-natured, indolent amusement without any malice in it. People loved him.

On coming home from work he washed and ate his dinner, then usually went out into the garden and pottered around the vegetable beds. This green world did not belong to him—his wife ruled it—but Andrei's father, like most working men, was passionately fond of plants. He loved to squat on his haunches among the beds, watching the growth of the seedlings with ever-fresh amazement, as if it were a miracle, listening to the music of the grass and

the life in the grass, inhaling the scents of moist earth and flowers. A curious stillness hung over this green world, on this street and in his own house. In this stillness life ripened, died and was born again unseen and unheard; buds burst on the willows; morning-glory spiralled to the roof, opening out to the sun its blue yellow-shot blaring trumpets; fragrant herbs exuded their sweet dying odour on the earthen floor of the hut; the modest stocks burst into sudden blossom of an evening in the front garden, and their heady perfume overspread the world and mingled with the goodly aroma of home-grown honeyed tobacco—the favourite smoke of Andrei's father. And this was happiness.

Andrei, of course, never suspected that this peace and quiet was happiness for his father. This, and the knowledge that he had work, and good honest bread, and that shady coolness reigned in the shuttered hut, and that the hut was his own, and that he could bolt the shutters at night, and that the world was quiet, and in this quietness his children grew up, tomatoes sprang from the seedlings and the twining morning-glory trumpeted its joyous paean to life. This was happiness, although storks do not nest on iron roofs.

It would have been unhappiness to Andrei's father and mother, to Victor's mother and to all the numerous people on this street if they had had to leave the comfort of their old homes for the uncertainties of weary wanderings in strange places and among strange people.

Then what was happiness? Andrei and Victor would have been horrified if told that they were doomed to live their lives out here, in their home town, in this street. No, no, anything but that! Better Nezhin, that other godforsaken neighbouring town of Nezhin with its flour-milling school—anything but Chibiryaki. For the two boys just now "to live" meant "to move." At seventeen one has not yet learned to love one's home town, which was only

noteworthy for the fact that one was born in it. This comes later, together with love for one's kind, old, uneducated mother in her shabby home-spun skirt.

"No!" Victor said with fierce finality. "Damn it all, we've got to make up our minds, Andrei. Time is passing."

So it was. It slid away like the water in the Psyol, and vanished out of sight. Every passing day was a day lost. They simply had to go.

When they were children, that bluff over the Psyol had seemed to them the end of the real, familiar world. Out there, across the river, was another, fantastic world—a blue-and-yellow one. The forest was mysteriously blue, so was the sky above it, the sand was yellow, and the wheat golden. Out there, amid the coppery pines, stood a bluish burial mound said to contain the bones of Dnieper Cossacks or Swedes—no one knew exactly which. The boys had not learnt to swim yet. But when they had, they swam across the Psyol and found that the world there was an ordinary place, just like Chibiryaki. The forest was not blue either, it was green as all forests are, and it was cool, dark and damp in there and smelt of mushrooms and stagnant water, and the sky above the forest was the same as that above Chibiryaki, and the huts in the villages were the same as those on their own street, only poorer. As for the burial mound, the peasants drank vodka on it with cucumbers for a snack, and told each other stories, some sad, some ribald.

No, they would have to go away, far beyond the Psyol, and find the really big, fantastic world.

Surely they were not going to sit their lives out here, behind closed shutters? Crawl along a thread like the twining morning-glory? Live and die in their own front garden like those stupid smug hollyhocks? In Ukrainian they were called *Rozhi*—Ugly Mugs. Conceited red-faced hollyhocks—no, no, they couldn't stay here! The white down from the poplars whirled over the town and lured

them on. The wave on the Dnyol beat impatiently against the boat moored by the bank.

They must go, they must! They said it to themselves a hundred times a day, but still they did not budge.

They could not make up their minds which road to choose.

There had been no choosing of paths for Andrei's father when he was young. He had stumbled on the old oil engine by chance, and it had dragged him along with it. Boys had gone out into the big world from Chibiryaki since time immemorial, but they had never chosen their own paths. It had been a matter of chance. Fathers, going away to ply their trade, would take their sons with them along the beaten paths their grandfathers had trodden, or some relative, remembering a distant nephew in Chibiryaki, would send for him and fix him up with a job. And so the Chibiryaki boys became plumbers and fitters, plasterers, waiters in eating-houses or stable-boys at the racecourse, not because they chose to be, but because necessity decided it for them. It fell out that way, and there was no one you could blame for it. You had to grin and bear it.

But Andrei and Victor could choose. Many roads lay open to them. They could choose whichever they liked. They were lucky to have been born at such a time.

It was the year nineteen hundred and thirty—the year of the great spurt. The country was bracing itself for a leap into the future. The evil work of ages crumbled and crashed in a single day. A fierce battle was being fought out on the old bounds, the old class, plucked up by the roots, was making its exit from history, hitting back savagely at its assailants, and Komsomol boys of Andrei's age fearlessly took their stand in the vanguard in face of the kulak's sawn-off gun. Two of them had recently been brought into Chibiryaki in pine wood coffins and laid in the public garden next to Victor's father.

A great impatience suddenly seized people. Life seemed too short for them to achieve all they had planned and to see the fulfilment of all their dreams. And so they began whipping time up. They wanted to pack five years of life into four and three; they made machines work faster and faster, made concrete harden quicker and quicker, and the earth bear richer and more frequent fruit.

People suddenly became aware of their own human powers, of the strength of their arms and of collective effort. Everything became possible—the conquest of the desert and the remodelling of human nature, the draining of swamps and the remaking of the world. The Turksib railway was finishing and the White Sea Canal beginning. The Arctic was being subdued and the Kolyma taiga was awaiting the axe. The machine fitters of Stalingrad, their work at the Tractor Plant done, moved out to the east, trainloads of them, all bound for the Magnitnaya Steppe, said to be a howling brown wilderness where savage winds ran riot.

The incessant creak of wheels hung over the country in those years. Everything stirred and shifted, was on the move—riding, sailing, tramping; a railway carriage on a waste plot became a railway station, a canvas tent a house, and mud-huts a town. They were temporary towns and temporary railway stations, and the people there were temporary dwellers—migrants with tool-bags on their backs—the only thing that was permanent there was what they left behind them. Those were days of great, painful and joyous upheaval and accomplishment, the echoes of which reached Chibiryaki too.

The whole country felt a lift of wings. Was it to be wondered at that the boys from Chibiryaki felt it too? The whole country spoke of nothing but tempo, roads, the open spaces, foundation pits and excavators; the whole country was on the move. Was it surprising that our boys too felt the lure of distant places?

All they had to do was to choose their path among the thousands of others, a single path, but the right one.

"A fine one," as Victor said; "the right one," as Andrei said.

That year a man's value stood very high. People were needed everywhere—in schools and on building sites, in towns and in deserts. Human hands, even unskilful ones, were rated highly. Training was quick. All that was needed was a man's "yes."

But neither Andrei nor Victor could say this, because they did not know their own minds yet.

They were lying on the warm sand by the Psyol, watching the yellow leaves floating downstream past the fading rushes, and with arms buried to the elbow in the sand and pebbles, going over the subject of roads and professions for the thousandth time. They did not know themselves what they wanted. Their dreams were vague and conflicting. Today they were enthusiastic over what they had rejected yesterday. And after toying with the idea all day they cast it aside ruthlessly in the evening, or else, losing patience with each other, quarrelled, only to make up again the next morning and renew their search. Their day-dreams in childhood had been harmonious, congenial dreams about the future and life together. But that had been a game, whereas now the time had come to dream in real earnest. They never suspected that it was now impossible to choose a path that would suit them both. They did not realize how different they were, and what different life-patterns were mapped out for them. It never entered their minds that they were already at the cross-roads.

"What about becoming an agriculturist?" Andrei timidly suggested, but Victor at once objected: "The land doesn't draw me. Better become divers." "What do you say to a forestry college?" "What? Live in the forest with the wolves? I'd be bored to death!" "I don't agree with

you, it's nice in the forest. So quiet. They make fiddles out of wood, you know. I read about it. It's called resonance wood." "You're looking for quiet, Andrei," Victor said testily, "but these are noisy times. To hell with colleges! Let's go straight to some building site out in the steppe, eh? Scaffold flyers, that's grand!"

They argued thus every day. They ruthlessly criticized all professions, knowing none. They talked about life with the naive wisdom of youth, which thinks it knows everything because it has read a couple of clever books, and can do anything simply because it wants to. They flung aside one profession after another, like so many pebbles. It was like a game. The pebbles were all round and smooth, but they meant nothing—you could shy them into the river with a light heart, admiring the circles they made on the water.

There was not a single profession that suited them both

In the life-stories of famous people they had read that men had found their vocation early, almost in childhood, and had followed it for the rest of their lives.

But Andrei and Victor were just ordinary provincial lads, who had displayed no remarkable gifts. They had been average scholars at school and had shown no special preference for any one subject.

Indeed, if the truth be told, their ambitions too were smallish. They did not aspire to be celebrities. They did not dream of fame and honours. All they wanted was to find themselves a suitable place in life, to be in the thick of things, or, as postwar boys would say today, in the direction of the main drive.

Most boys get their ambitions from books, from the stories of their fathers or teachers, and in these days, from the screen. But in 1930 the most romantic reading, more thrilling than any books or films, was the newspapers. Books had not yet described and songs had not

yet sung the things, more fantastic than legend or fiction, which people of the 'thirties were doing. Even an advertisement in the *Komsomolskaya Pravda* headed "Where To Go and Study" sounded like stirring music to these boys of Chibiryaki. Reading an account of the fighting on the Chinese Eastern Railway with the Japanese aggressors and Manchurian militarists, they wanted to become frontier guards, and if it was a report about the *Sedov* sailing for the Arctic regions, they wanted to become sailors or winterers. They would have followed the geologists to the Ural's where, the papers reported that morning, Soviet potassium had been found, had they not learnt from the papers the next day about the first flight of a Soviet airship over Moscow. They seesawed from one idea to another. What had seemed alluring at one moment, would be dimmed by some new glowing vision the next.

The secretary of the Komsomol nucleus began to lose patience with them. He was tired of offering them the choice of travel warrants to technical schools and construction sites.

"You're like a couple of pernickety old bachelors choosing a wife!" he said with annoyance. "Take any one. You'll make a go of it anywhere."

He did not understand that they really were bachelors wooing life, and afraid of making a wrong choice. At seventeen one imagines that one chooses but once for a lifetime. Seventeen-year-olds are very serious people.

In vain did the secretary dangle the bait of "conditions" and "privileges" before them. It was not a good or easy life, nor a career, nor even fame they sought. They knew that if they worked they would get paid, if they went to study they would receive a State allowance. They were not spoilt. Want and hardships held no fears for them. The snow hole of the Arctic traveller or the ragged tent of the geologist had greater charms for them than a country villa; the smoke-flavoured soldier's hash heated over

the camp-fire in a mess-tin was more delicious than any restaurant dish. That much they knew. What they did not know was—which was best, the snow hole or the ragged tent?

Their boyish hearts told them unerringly that somewhere in this world they would find their appointed lot, their destiny, their luck. All they had to do was to look for it, but they did not know where to look—whether on the water or under it, in the clouds or on the earth, in the Kara Kum sands or the remote Arctic.

The only place their mental quest did not lead them was underground.

They were nice, simple, honest boys with eyes that were eager and inquisitive, with notions about the world that were foggy and unselfish, with desires that were vague and restless, with a soul open to all that was good—and I should like you to love them as I love them, and to follow them and me to the end of this book, which tells the story of their lives.

* 2 *

One more day passed, then two, then a week, but they were still where they were. The artless roosters woke them at dawn with an incredulous “cock-a-doodle-do”—you boys still here?

Andrei's father studied his son with amusement. He understood everything but did not want to interfere. Youth would find its own way, it would not suffer advice. He would not have known what to advise his son in any case. “That he should stay at home? That the hut would be his? That if they mended the roof and painted the walls it would be as good as new?” All he could offer his son was the hut, whereas life offered him the whole world.

Yet it would be interesting to see what choice his son made.

"He has no go in him, that's the trouble!" Andrei's father thought ruefully. "No driving power, just too bad!"

It was annoying, his son growing up such a quiet, taciturn, even timid lad. He didn't have that modern zip and go in him. He was shy in company, blushed in front of girls. No, he wouldn't go far!

"I suppose he'll tag after Victor as usual," his father thought regretfully. "That fellow's as sharp as they make 'em."

Meanwhile the boys were still seeking. They prowled about the town, as if it were a station platform, bored and impatient. They felt like travellers at a train stop. Soon the guard would blow his whistle and their train would pull out. They had taken leave of all that needed taking leave of, and ripped from their hearts all the fond and cherished things that needed ripping off. Trains went past one after another with tantalizing lights, but their train had not come in yet.

Victor's latest idea was to become a film actor. He had heard of an institute somewhere in Moscow. No examinations, and no special papers were needed to go there—all you had to have was a "fancy face" and they'd make an actor out of you there in no time. He was a handsome lad and he knew it. He had a lithe supple body, flaming black eyes and an insolent truculent mouth. He had a trick of drawing in and biting his underlip, which made him look as if he were going to whistle. The boys nicknamed him "gypsy," and the girls peeped at him over the wattle fences with tender awe. The people there would take him on as a film actor all right.

But what was he to do with Andrei? That slow lumbering gait, the straw hair and that funny tuft over his forehead. He might pass muster as a comedian perhaps?

"Anyway, we'll see about that!" Victor decided. He did not like to contemplate obstacles when he wanted anything badly. Obstacles irritated him, and he simply did

not bother his head about them. A single spark was enough to kindle his enthusiasm, which cooled down as quickly as it flamed up. His was the temperament of a hammersmith, not of a turner.

"Moscow, old chap, the capital . . . the films . . . eh?" he ran on excitedly. "Maybe we've got talent, who knows? Maybe it's the very thing?"

Andrei listened in silence. He never argued with Victor—he was no good at arguing. He listened patiently to his friend's wild fantasies. His silence might even have been taken for agreement. Then he mumbled in a quiet apologetic sort of tone:

"No, I don't want to."

And that quashed that dream.

Victor was furious.

"Hang it all, Andrei, what the devil do you want then?" he shouted, almost in tears.

And Andrei, his head slightly bent and shoulders hunched, heard his friend's abuse out in silence, then repeated quietly and doggedly:

"No. I don't want to."

A September chill had begun to draw from the water, and the woods across the river were yellowing. The yellow leaves came out suddenly, and autumn set in overnight, like the wrinkles in an old maid's face; in the colleges which the boys had rejected, lessons had started; the willow on the Psyol wearied of weeping over the boys' departure, and its leaves began to turn too.

One day the boys did not go down to the Psyol. They were tired of watching the river hurry past, as if bent on some important errand and too busy to care about those two idle boys on the bank.

The boys went out on to the highroad, out of town. There, on the outskirts of Chibiryaki, stood a sleepy old burial mound, grey with silvery wormwood. They climbed to the top and lay down in the grass.

It was nice and drowsy on top of that mound. The earth was cool and restful, the grass dry, warmed by the last generous rays of the September sun. The wormwood rippled in bluish wavelets under the wind, as though lulling the boys to sleep. People said this used to be a favourite haunt of steppe eagles, but now you couldn't even see a pigeon hawk anywhere near. Perhaps, if you searched in the grass, you might find the skull and bones of an ox—the road running below had only recently been used by the *tchoomaks*—Ukrainian ox-cart drivers.

It turned and twisted in loops, a typical *tchoomak* road. Like the Psyol, it seemed to be flowing out into the distance, and the carts on it were like boats, the pedestrians like swimmers, and the dust like waves.

Andrei had no wish to look at the road. He turned over on his back and looked up at the sky instead.

But even there the restless clouds sped on their hurried way; the sky, too, was in motion; it kept changing every minute, so Andrei turned over again and lay face downwards. That was better.

The wormwood exuded the calm, bitterish odour of death; that was how it smelt at the cemetery or in the church during the funeral service, when they burned incense. "Why does wormwood always smell of the grave?" Andrei mused. "Maybe it's the other way round?" He rubbed some of the wormwood between the palms of his hands and smelt them. "Perhaps I shouldn't go anywhere?" the thought struck him. "Just stay here. Work with Father at the mill. They say construction jobs are going to start in Chibiryaki next year. Going to build an electric station. Perhaps I ought to stay?" He took another meditative sniff at the wormwood.

As for Victor, the road claimed all his attention. He was strangely silent and uncommunicative and had not said a word to his friend that morning. He just lay looking down the road. Everything on it was thrilling—the

dust, the creak of carts, and the smells of petrol, sheep and dung. It seemed to Victor that he could smell those odours even here, high up on the barrow. The smell of wormwood did not reach him.

Poplars, like lean long-legged pedestrians, coated with dust, ran down the road and were lost beyond the sky-line. Those in front were probably nearing Poltava. "And in Poltava," Victor thought, "you can get on to a train and go where you like—to Moscow, to the Caucasus, or to the Pacific Ocean." If not an actor, he could become an airman, a stevedore, or even a tramp, one of those vagabonds Maxim Gorky wrote about, free as a bird.

He had even suggested the idea to Andrei one day. And Andrei, having heard him out in silence, as usual, had merely asked: "But what about registration?" "What registration?" Victor had queried blankly "The Komсомol. We've got to be registered somewhere."

They would never get out of Chibiryaki at that rate. Here everything held him—his mother, Andrei, the Komсомol, the very stones in the road, each of which was so familiar to him. He'd never tear himself away unless he got up from that barrow and just ran, ran anywhere, without looking back, or saying good-bye to anyone; walk off alongside those poplars, no matter where and why so long as he did not have to lie here on this funereal wormwood.

Suddenly, in a quiet voice, as though thinking aloud, he said, without looking at Andrei.

"What about each going his own way?"

"Eh?" Andrei said blankly, and smiled with a guilty air. He thought Victor had been speaking to him for some time, while he had been dozing, lulled by the wormwood.

"I said, maybe we ought to try our luck separately," Victor repeated. "Each on his own."

He avoided his friend's eyes as he said it. He paused, expecting Andrei to jump up with a cry: "Don't leave me

in the lurch, brother, I'll go anywhere you like, only let's stick together."

But Andrei said nothing.

Victor then began speaking again—he had to get this off his chest. It was September already, he protested, autumn, and most of the boys had long since gone away, simple straightforward boys, not overparticular, like Andrei, while they were sitting in Chibiryaki, waiting for a gold carriage, expecting luck to be served up to them on a platter, and it was all Andrei's fault, he was so hard to please, and if it hadn't been for Andrei, Victor would now be in Moscow, a student in the Cinema Institute. He didn't see why he should miss the chance of his life, even for the sake of a pal.

He worked himself up more and more, flinging into his friend's face words which he knew himself were unfair and unkind, words he should not have spoken, but he had reached the end of his tether. The dusty poplars ran down the roadsides towards Poltava; the wind swayed the green rucksacks on their backs.

Andrei said nothing.

He lay face downwards in the grass and did not stir. He could not make out how this thing had happened. There had been friendship, and common dreams, and sacred boyish vows, and their own stars overhead—the Milky Way, as familiar to them as the road to the Psyol. And now what? Victor was right. He was bold, adroit and smart. He would be able to make his way alone. What did he want Andrei for? Only an extra burden.

But what about friendship? So it was friendship up to the cross-roads. Andrei suddenly felt like crying.

God knows how this quarrel might have ended. Childish friendship is such a frail, delicate and immature thing. Very likely they would have simply made up the next morning, met each other halfway and chosen at last a path which would have suited them both. Or perhaps

they would have parted for good, gone different ways, and their lives would have followed different patterns. And years afterwards, if they met again, they would either wonder how they could ever have dreamt of following the same trail, or regret they had not done so. Anything might have happened after that morning on the mound, when Victor, pulling himself up short, suddenly ran away, leaving Andrei lying alone in the grass; but that evening they were both summoned unexpectedly to the District Committee of the Komsomol.

They went there each on his own and there they met.

The office was crowded with Komsomol members, but no one knew what they had been called for.

"Maybe it's war?" someone suggested, and everyone laughed. But it might be, came the afterthought. War was in the air at the time.

At last the Secretary, Pashchenko, arrived, preoccupied and dishevelled, as usual. This blue-eyed young man, in a shirt embroidered with blue cornflowers, lived in a constant state of battle alarm. The simple phrase: "Comrades, you've got to pay your membership fees regularly," sounded in his mouth like a call to arms. He was richly endowed with a sense of responsibility, but devoid altogether of a sense of humour.

He tapped the water-bottle with his pencil, and without waiting for the noise to die down and people to take their seats, shouted: "Comrades! Production hitch in the Donbas!"—then drew his breath.

This was entirely unexpected. Everyone was baffled.

A girl's voice was heard to ask ingenuously: "Say, boys, where's the Donbas?" but she was immediately suppressed. Pashchenko once more shouted vehemently: "There's a production hitch in the Donbas, comrades!"—and the unknown Donbas suddenly moved close up to Andrei, stood right next to him, shaggy, smoky and, for some reason, ravaged. Whistles and sirens set up a con-

fused racket all around, like a startled flock of jackdaws in the autumn. That was about all the word "Donbas" conveyed to Andrei—smoke, whistles and grey rain. He could not imagine what it had to do with him.

Victor, on the other hand, was all agog. "Production hitch!" He was fond of such words. They had the tang of battle in them. In another minute Pashchenko would command: "Forward, boys! Attack! To the death!" And they would go. They would! Victor did not know yet what deeds of valour Pashchenko was expecting of them: like Andrei, he had but a vague idea of that unknown Donbas, and a still vaguer one about the "production hitch in the Donbas." The phrase was a new one in Chibiryaki. But Victor was already in the grip of a wild exultant feeling, which swept him off his feet, like that time, a year ago, when the same Pashchenko had cried with alarm: "Comrades, a conflict on the Chinese Eastern Railway!" Victor, like most of us, belonged to the romantic generation.

Pashchenko was now speaking about the five-year plan. His voice every now and then rose to a strident pitch—he never could speak calmly. He had that likable true-Komsomol trait of taking everything to heart. For him there were no distant countries, no affairs that did not concern him closely. He was interested in everything—the progress of grain collection in Siberia, the cotton crop in Uzbekistan, the execution of Communists in Italy. The suppression of the miners' strike in the Ruhr affected him as if it were his own personal tragedy.

He spoke disjointedly, but without pause. The words came of themselves, perhaps not the ones he needed, but his passion coloured them all and a miracle would seem to have happened to them: clumsy words were beautified, dead ones came alive.

When his throat grew dry, he swallowed water hurriedly from a glass as if it were boiling hot, and plunged on without even wiping his lips.

"How well he speaks! Without a stop!" Andrei thought with admiration and sighed. "I couldn't do it. If I had to make a speech I'd be scared. I'd run away." And, again the thought struck him that he need not go anywhere. Stay here. Work with Pashchenko in the Komsomol, learn from him. Become like Pashchenko himself.

Pashchenko broke off on a high note, then dropped into a matter-of-fact tone:

"Now I'll read you the decision of the District Committee." He started rummaging about in his numerous pockets—he carried no brief case as a matter of principle.

Victor watched him impatiently. He would know in a minute what heroic deeds were expected of them; he was ready for any deed. But Pashchenko was still rummaging for the paper; he fished all kinds of odds and ends out of his pockets in his search for it; suddenly he pulled out a tinfoil chocolate wrapper—he was fond of sweets—and was thrown into such confusion that everyone laughed. Victor did not even smile. He saw nothing funny in it. He was in an exalted sacrificial mood at the moment, and the least he expected from Pashchenko was a command to go to the stake.

Instead of this he heard:

"The Chibiryaki District Komsomol Committee hails the initiative of the Moscow and Leningrad Komsomol, and on their part have decided to help rally the thirty thousand volunteers for permanent work in the Donbas mines by sending ten of the best Komsomol members of the Chibiryaki organization, namely: Victor Abrosimov, Mitrofan Borisenko, Andrei Voronko...."

Andrei was surprised to hear his name. He thought no one knew him in the District Committee and would not think of him. And now he was suddenly mentioned among the ten best. He blushed.

"They haven't forgotten me then!"

The next minute this sense of joyous confusion was

gone. He realized what that list of ten meant. "So they're sending us to work as miners? Miners?" he thought, looking around bewildered. Unconsciously, his eyes sought Victor.

Having quarrelled that morning, they were sitting apart, but just then their eyes met. Both felt that at that moment their fate was being decided. Andrei's face expressed dismay, Victor's looked hurt.

Yes, hurt. Even his lips quivered in a pained childish way. It was as if Pashchenko had deceived him, made cruel fun of him. Victor was ready to go anywhere between sky and sea—to the North Pole if need be. But to a mine? To be just a miner? A minute before he had been prepared to perform any deed of valour and die doing it—he was still prepared to do it. But where was the valour? A miner, nothing more. He all but jumped up and cried out, on the verge of tears: "I don't want to! You have no right!"

Pashchenko caught the expression on Victor's face. It surprised the Secretary, even hurt him. That was not what he had expected to see after his impassioned speech.

He said coldly:

"Of course, if anyone doesn't like it, he can refuse. It isn't compulsory."

* 3 *

That autumn I, too, pondered over my life. I, too, had to choose a path for myself.

My term of military service was over. I had passed the promotion examinations and received the rank of platoon commander. I had the choice of either staying on in the army or being transferred to the reserve.

I could not make up my mind.

I was twenty-three, but like most boys of my generation I had started life early. Sometimes it seemed to me

that I had lived a long and strenuous life, sometimes that I had not lived at all.

It was my ambition, ever since I was a child, to become a writer. I wrote boyish verses, which were printed in the Komsomol newspaper *Young Miner*, and was very proud of them, attaching to them my full name: Sergei Bazhanov. But one day I was summoned to the gubernia Committee of the Komsomol and advised not to put my full name to my verses.

"Your verses are very bad," the Komsomol Secretary coolly explained. "If you ever become a real writer you'll be ashamed of them. Put your name only to good verses."

But all my verses seemed good to me at the time, and I felt quite offended.

Later, when I was eighteen, I realized that I was no poet, and gave up writing poetry. I started working on a newspaper.

For some reason I was immediately dubbed "writer" in the regiment.

My company commander, a dapper little man, told me one day, in that characteristic, staccato style of speech which he used at drill or when giving someone a "wiggling" at evening parade:

"Whole company," he said. "See? Proud. Very. See? To have a writer in our ranks. Glad. Very!" and he put two fingers to the peak of his cap as though saluting. Then he glanced at my blotchy boots and wound up on the same note: "Boots—need washing. Then polish. Snappy. Disgrace. Get me?" And I cheerfully trotted off to the brook to wash my boots.

I went into the army willingly and joyfully—he who has ever been in the Komsomol will understand me. We had not been patrons of the Red Cossack Troop and the Navy for nothing. True, I had tried to get into the cavalry, but landed in the mountain infantry instead. It had its compensations, though—I was posted on the frontier!

True, not the Far Eastern frontier, but the Turkish. But then the mountains! While our jolly box-car, filled with recruits, was rolling through the wheat fields of Voronezh, the Ukraine and Kuban, I built up dreams enough to fill a dozen books—all about the hills, about Chechen highlanders and about emprise on the frontier. You haven't forgotten that I was only getting on for twenty-two, have you? Life to me seemed but an exciting theme for unwritten books.

In the regiment we were immediately taken "seriously in hand," as the sergeant-major expressed it. It was frontier-regiment style. A far cry to romance. To start with we were clipped and fed.

"Number!" commanded the sergeant-major.

"Twenty-seven!" I yelled shrilly when my turn came. Everyone laughed, and suddenly I realized with a shock that I was only a number now—number twenty-seven, cropped and flap-eared. Only yesterday, in my civilian overcoat, I had stood out more or less from the rest. Now the great democracy of the military tunic had levelled us all down. I was only a unit among thousands.

And lest the toe of my rusty army boot stuck out of the line of other rusty toes, the sergeant-major commanded: "Dress!" After that he walked the line, whittling it down as he went along like a carpenter planing a rough board. He began modelling an ideal straight line out of diverse human bodies, and before long subjugated to it the belly of the man on my right and the powerful shoulders of the man on my left.

Then he commanded: "Right turn!" and the line swung round like a well-oiled mechanism; I was only a little screw in that mechanism. Then the sergeant-major rapped out: "Quick march!"—and the hundred-legged body started moving, mine along with it. When I fell out of step the sergeant-major yelled: "Hi, you in the seventh, get into step!"—and I hastily complied.

We were marching across the stony drill-ground, and the officers who happened to be passing by eyed us recruits with amusement. Could any of them guess that the seventh in the line from the left was a "writer"? All they cared about, as they cast a trained eye over the marching line, was to see whether it kept straight.

And then the storm broke. The philistine in me, whose presence I had never suspected, suddenly rebelled. "I won't!" he shouted in a terrible rage. "I won't submit to military arithmetic and geometry! I don't want to divide myself up in twos, fours and eights! I don't want to live by signals and commands. I don't want to be dragged out of bed when I still want to sleep, and forced to eat when I'm not hungry. Why must I obey my spluttering section leader? He isn't even member of the Party!"

I blush at the absurdity of it now, but at that time the philistine got the better of me. I marched along looking like a victim of some monstrous injustice who had lost all hope of obtaining redress.

I don't know where this "revolt" would have ended, but the company political instructor came and announced that there was to be a regimental Party meeting in the evening. . . .

Years have passed since then, but I shall always remember that meeting.

You have, of course, experienced it: every time you go to a Party meeting you feel thrilled in some new way, as if it were your first meeting. You feel a need to tidy yourself up, brace yourself inwardly. The petty squabbles of the workaday world are left behind, and your own private little affairs become trivial and unimportant compared with the big common interest for the sake of which you are going to the meeting.

I remember all kinds of meetings—solemn and businesslike ones, jolly and furious ones, when we used to fight the deviators of every colour and description until we were blue in the face; the friend of yesterday today became an enemy; we had to learn to be implacable. ❖

I remember the long all-night meetings on "personal items," when a comrade's faults, merits and errors were weighed in the balance of Party honour. We wished to be fair. We judged unhurriedly. Everyone then became a psychologist and a doctor. In passing a verdict we looked the offender squarely in the face.

I remember meetings far away from home and the "Mainland," somewhere at a polar station, or an Arctic expedition, or on board ship during a sea voyage; we loved to round off those meetings with the "International." It sounds particularly well at the North Pole.

I remember meetings before zero hour, in the woods, in the mountains, or simply in the trenches. And one meeting I remember after battle. It was on the Karelian Isthmus, in the winter, on the icebound river Vuoksen; our regiment had wavered and fled, and we, Communists, had not been able to stop it.

I remember that meeting. Even those of us who wore bloody bandages looked down at the snow shamefaced; they, too, shared the blame.

The regiment went into action again straight from the meeting.

And I remember Party meetings at which I was only a guest. It was in a strange land, under a strange sky, and amid strange pines that did not resemble ours, and people spoke in a strange tongue, and even sat at the meetings not the way we sit—the Japanese, for instance, sat right on the floor, squatting on their heels on mats. But I understood their speeches without the aid of an interpreter, my heart interpreted for me. We were all people of the same faith, of the same Party.

I think no meetings in the world are as simple and unostentatious as ours. Then why do I find them so exciting? What is their magic power? Why, after them, will a man brave fire, battle and death unflinchingly—as our fathers did in '21 when they attacked Kronstadt across the ice, and as we did in '45 when we stormed Berlin.

We alone know the secret of that magic power.

Our Party secretaries seldom soothe us with sedative speeches. No matter how hard we work and how well, they are never satisfied. That accounts for the exacting word “must!” we so frequently hear at meetings. We hear in it not the swish of the whip—we have all come to the Party voluntarily—but the call of the bugle, the signal for battle.

The general and the soldier, the plumber and the minister, sit at the meetings side by side, members of a single Party; the stern word “must!” applies to each and all.

Here no one will ever say: We have worked—now we can rest, we have succeeded—now we can have a good time. The bugle sings “must!” Yes, we must accomplish all that has been ordained for us.

That is why I remember all the Party meetings I ever attended in my life—they are notched in my memory and in my life, each a new step in an endless staircase. I ascend it side by side with my comrades, ever up and up towards the shining heights which are now clearly visible. . . .

One such step was my first Party meeting in the regiment.

I went there, nursing my “grievance” to keep it warm. I do not remember now exactly what I intended doing—I think I was going to make a speech, a speech which was to create a sensation and make everybody feel

ashamed at having overlooked such a "gem" among the grey army coats. But as soon as I found myself in that customary, somewhat noisy, somewhat exciting atmosphere of the Party meeting, my "grievance" suddenly vanished; it melted like an icicle brought into a warm room.

The regimental commander made a report concerning our training tasks—"we must do this and that"—and it was borne in upon me as I listened to him that the "must" applied to me too. I experienced once more, as in childhood, that familiar thrilling sense of fusion between "I" and "we." And I was happy in that feeling.

I was not ten years old when the Revolution took place. I had barely turned twelve when I first knocked timidly on the door of the Komsomol branch; they did not accept me, but neither did they drive me away. Out of such small chaps as I they organized a "children's Communist group," and I was happy and proud. We were humorously dubbed "Party Sprats," but I did not take offence. I looked forward eagerly to the time when I would be a full-grown Komsomol member. I was fourteen when the Komsomol at last enrolled me, and at nineteen I was a Communist. I had never been non-party.

How then could I "rebel" against discipline, I, who had grown up in the collective, in the ranks, ever since I was a child? I felt ashamed of myself. I was to remember that Party meeting as long as I lived.

And now my term of military service was over.

I had passed the promotion examination and received the rank of platoon commander. Now I had to decide my own fate, choose my own path.

In the evening, after the promotion order had been promulgated, Avseyenko, 2nd Company commander, came

up to me. His bright, cunning little eyes pursed still smaller with amusement, he congratulated me and handed me a present—two crimson cube insignia.

"Thanks!" I said, flustered, and was about to thrust them into my pocket, but Avseyenko cried laughingly:

"Oh, no you don't! You'll have to put them on. Maybe you think the cube is not enough?" he suddenly said slyly. "Leo Tolstoy, by the way, was only a second lieutenant. But then they say he was an excellent shot and knew ballistics."

That was a dig at me—ballistics was not my strong point.

"Now have a look at yourself!" Avseyenko said, drawing me towards the mirror in the Lenin Room. "Not bad, eh?"

It was strange to see officer's insignia on my tunic. That tunic had done honourable service, and its term of wear ended with my term of army service. Before my examination I had given it a thorough wash in the Kura, but the mark of the rifle strap on the shoulder was ineradicably black, and the elbows told their tale of "crawl practice." The prickly shrubs on Height 537.5, the dust and salt of the Kobuleti camp, the camp-fire nights of the mountain expeditions were imprinted for all time on my tunic. It was sad to think that we would now have to part company.

"We'll order you a tunic tomorrow from my tailor," Avseyenko rattled on. "He's a damned smart tailor, the son of a gun! And not expensive. Oh, well, you'll command a platoon for a year or two, and then you'll get a company, with a battalion, a regiment and a division in the offing."

I was not listening to him. The mirror showed me a snub-nosed lad in a soldier's tunic, and I thought—What if I really remained?

That evening Avseyenko and I, with three other officers of our acquaintance, were sitting in a *dukhan*—a Caucasian tavern—"wetting" my promotion. Like people everywhere in the Caucasus, we drank wine, not vodka, and as always, when wine is plentiful, we drank little.

Avseyenko still kept at me. He was my senior by only five years. But those five years had enabled him, youngster though he was, to participate in the Civil War, while I had missed it—a fact which I always deeply regretted.

He was a splendid officer, a bachelor, a wit and a dandy. At the examinations I feared his tongue more than anything. He wore his military uniform with the careless elegance of a regular army officer; his soft top-boots were heelless, his tunic was of Caucasian cut, and his *Budyonovka*,* which was like no other in the regiment, resembled something between a French military cap and the high-crested helmet of an ancient Russian knight. Avseyenko's headgear had always annoyed me—it was a profanation of the romantic spirit of the First Mounted Army.

"Of course," he rambled on, narrowing his beady mocking eyes, "of course, some people don't think much of a platoon commander's rank. Very well! Then let's talk about it in terms of literary rank. If Gorky, say, is literature's commander-in-chief, what will you be? Section leader?"

"Orderly. . ." I answered.

"Granted. You know best. But here in a platoon you have forty bayonets, forty men under your command. Forty men!"

"And four light machine guns," Stakhovsky, the assistant chief of staff, put in.

"Now, how many active characters are there in a novel, say?" Avseyenko pursued. "Twenty, thirty, fifty?"

* Helmet-shaped cap, named after Budyonny, Commander of the First Mounted Army.—*Tr.*

"Less," I muttered.

"There, you see. And all of them invented by the author. He can do what he likes with them, he can kill them or strike them off the roll. And here you have forty living men in your hands. Every one of them a character. Not a character invented by you. They want to live their own way, not the way you tell them. And you dare not—I say you dare not—lose a single one of them, strike a single one of them off the roll. You, the commander, are responsible for their death, too, even though they're killed in battle! It's your business to subordinate all these soldiers to your will, otherwise you're not a commander, but a . . . clerk!"

"How true! How true that is, Sasha!" Stakhovsky cried ecstatically. "People talk about the grind, the soldier's grind and that kind of thing. Why, come to think of it, it's poetry!" He leaned over to Avseyenko with his glass. "You've hit it, Sasha, good boy!"

"Y-e-ss. . ." Vlasov let fall thoughtfully. He was permanent platoon commander of the regimental school, and everyone in the regiment, even the soldiers, called him simply "Bachelor Vasya" to distinguish him from the other Vlasov in the regiment, who was a married man. "Thousands of cropped youngsters have passed through my hands. And I remember every one of them."

"You should be proud of it!" Stakhovsky shouted, prodding the crimson cube on my collar with a stubby finger. "Appreciate it! You got that cube easy, my dear chap. Not like us."

"It isn't hard to get even a rhomb nowadays!" young Fedorchuk laughed. "The legal profession have rhombs and so have the office workers."

"That depends on the post you occupy," Stakhovsky explained. "It isn't promotion by length of service." Like all old campaigners he could not stand "upstarts."

"That's all right as far as it goes," he said ironically. "You know the saying: give him a rhomb, but don't give him a company. Nothing will happen to the rhomb, but he'll ruin the company."

"Here's to you, Sergei!" Avseyenko suddenly said in a heartfelt tone. "Your health!" We clinked glasses. "Of course, you're your own master, you know best. What can we offer you? A modest place in the regiment and our friendship. It isn't much. But take my advice, Sergei—stay here. Stay in the regiment. Even an orderly in the army is an honourable job. But not in literature." He looked me straight in the eyes and clinked glasses again. "Stay here, Sergei! Forty live men are better than forty dreamt-up book ones!"

"We'll help you!" Fedorchuk said shyly, coming up to clink glasses.

"Of course, we will! Why shouldn't we help him!" Vlasov shouted. "I'll go through every exercise with you beforehand."

"And if you want regulations, abstracts and things, I've got all you need!" Stakhovsky threw in. "I've got some splendid abstracts."

I stood deeply moved, clinking glasses with these warm-hearted men and thinking—perhaps I really ought to stay?

"Think it over," the regimental commander, Pavel Filippovich, that kindest of all men, told me. "We're not rushing you. Decide for yourself! If you want to stay in the army, you're welcome. We'll give you a platoon. If not, go and become a writer."

He saw me to the door, where, dropping his voice tactfully to a whisper, he asked:

"How do you feel about it yourself—do you think you have it in you?"

I was given three days to make my choice. I rambled about the hills, thinking it over.

We were stationed on the Turkish frontier in a little town bearing the romantic name Akhaltsikh, which means New Fort. There had really been a fortress here once with barracks in it, and in those barracks the Tenginsky Regiment had been quartered. The shop-window of the town's photographer Balturmianz ("Established 1877") still displayed fly-specked portraits of the regimental officers, among them the photograph of the regimental priest, a hairy fellow complete with cross, decorations and sword.

Lermontov, the poet, once served in the Tenginsky Regiment. I am not sure whether he lived in Akhaltsikh, in this fort, but at that time I very much wished that he had.

I wished he had lived here and had rambled about as I was now doing, gazing meditatively at these grey-green hillocks, at the mountains, the apple orchards and the grassy roofs.

In the evenings I returned to the regiment. Here everything was familiar and dear to me. All the men, from the regimental commander to Grisha Odinoky, the civilian "balalaika virtuoso," who had been washed up by no one knew what wave and left stranded in the regimental club; all the buildings, from the flag tower, where the regimental colours, the holy of holies, were kept under guard in a grey wrapper, to the stables of the supply company. The stallion Raven, my affectionate and ugly friend, stood in the stall here, eternally dozing.

He really was ungainly, that huge dray horse with a scrawny neck like an adder's. But we had been out in the mountains together for forty days and forty nights, and that is not a thing you can ever forget.

I remember the night over Koblian-chai. . . . No one in the regiment slept that night. We stood—with artillery and waggons—on a narrow mountain path over a precipice, waiting for daybreak. It was cold. Down below the river roared and foamed. One false step and you would go hurtling over the precipice. The regiment had lost many

horses during that march, but my phlegmatic wistful Raven pulled through. I could go on riding him in future too. The commander of a machine-gun platoon was entitled to a horse.

Should I remain?

Perhaps I really should? I thought of it day and night. It would be a hard, restless garrison life. Drill, marches, reviews, praise and ratings. And the little town on the frontier, where a shot in the night is routine, and the arrival of a company of actors or singers an event. And the holidays, when, according to regimental tradition, the officers' wives in white aprons wait on the soldiers in the mess and serve them dinner, sweet pilau with raisins and home-brewed *kvass* made on grandma's recipe.

And there would be weekdays, many weekdays. Excitement over every Reportable Incident—the dirt found in Ivanov's machine gun, the lice the horrified sanitary man discovered in Petrov's cot, the fact that Sidorov, the handsome footballer was AWOL.

And there would be fitful nights, when you slept with your pistol under the pillow in case of an alarm call. And the crisp frosty mornings in the mountains, when, "in conditions approximating a tactical situation," you crawled up the face of cliffs, imagining yourself a Suvorov in the Alps. And the summer record practice, when you lie in the firing line with your platoon, trying to appear cool, while you felt, under your belly, the damp goodly earth, smelling of mint, and pressed your body to it closer to find in it strength and support for a well-aimed shot. The scarlet flag flutters on the tower—Fire! The startled echo rings long from the awakened hills. The bugle sings shrilly and mockingly: "Hit it! Hit it!" And you are dying to hit the target!

And that life would be rich with the rollicking flavour of youth, with warm manly friendships, poetry, charm, strife. . . .

Should I stay? But what about my unwritten books? The untrodden trails? And the old dreams? Suddenly other voices began to ring in my ears, voices that were still faint and indistinct; it was like the sound of murmuring winds, luring me on and on. Whither?

And I went out into the mountains, or ran into town through the narrow crooked streets, prowling about there in the centre and listening to the guttural speech around me.

The bazaar was crowded with highlanders. A mustachioed Kurd in a ragged *besmet* with a long antique dagger of chased silver at his side rode past on horseback with one hand picturesquely placed on his hip. A grave-faced highlander in a brown *bashlik* wound turban-wise round his head, in coarse woollen *tumbans* with a huge sheep's tail behind, and warm stockings worn inside a pair of soft light *yamans*, threaded his way slowly through the crowd. He led a donkey, on which sat his wife, a portly majestic woman, covered from head to foot with a fine white silk shawl. She rolled past with broad swaying hips, amidst a tinkle of necklaces and jingle of harness.

Solid pungent smells of food hung over the bazaar—warm sheep's cheese, goat's milk, fat mutton, onions, unsalted *lavash* bread-cakes, sun-cured fish and the famous Akhaltsikh apples. There was an acrid smell of horse sweat and smoke. Bloody sheep's carcasses hung over the doors of the butchers' shops. Smoky cauldrons swayed on long iron chains over the red-hot stones of cooking fires. The chains creaked, and it seemed as if the cauldrons would break anchor at any moment and put out to sea.

All round was a hubbub of noises—jingling, rattling, shouting, and haggling. The doors of the little shops and workshops stood wide open, and the silversmiths, tin-smiths, saddlers, barbers, dyers, wire-spinners, cabinet-

makers, blacksmiths and bootmakers plied their trades in sight of all, their wares coming hot from deft hands.

Saddlers were fashioning the famous Caucasian saddles with inlaid silver patterns and overlaid deer bone in the form of crossed daggers. The wire-spinners drew gold and silver thread on a hand loom, making tinsel, fringes and laces. Casemakers were working on huge chests painted brightly in free designs, caskets with secret hiding places, and boxes with metal corner pieces. Bootmakers—young lads—swiftly and jauntily sewed soft *choosti* out of grey tarpaulin with a thick sole made out of old tyres; buses and motor cars were now as customary as the creaky bullock-carts. The blacksmiths kept closer to the bazaar, the gunsmiths closer to the hills; lately, however, they were more often employed mending primus-stoves and bicycles than guns.

The aristocrats of the Akhaltsikh handicraft world—the goldsmiths and jewellers—lived a life apart. They worked and dwelt in their rough-hewn stone *saklia*, with iron-barred windows—a reminder of the Armenian-Turkish massacre. Lean-stooped, consumptive and taciturn, with narrow spectacles on the tip of black-speckled noses, they worked on brass-figured girdles, brooches and near silver trinkets; genuine gold articles were fashioned secretly and carefully; the intricate ornaments, cunning designs and delicate lacework out of the malleable metal were worked thread by thread. The town was famous for their unique craft.

And I? I merely drifted through this busy working world. I had not yet chosen a profession to suit me.

One day I went far out to the river Kura. Here, on the bank, I spent practically the whole day.

The wild, turbid, yellow river sped busily on its way. It, too, had work to do—carrying rafts.

The raftsmen, wet from head to foot, stood on the logs with legs planted wide apart, throwing their weight on

the long guiding poles; an old man stood at the tiller. He was barefoot, and his wide trousers, tapering at the ankles, billowed out like a sail in the wind.

"Haupthildi!" he kept shouting. "Look out!"

The rafts rushed between the stones, risking a smash-up at any moment.

"Haupthildi!" the old man yelled and suddenly threw his whole weight on the tiller. He knew his business. All the people around me knew their business.

Once more the winds of distant trails roared in my ears.

Wouldn't it be grand to rush along like that on the Kura amid a watery spray, risking at any moment to drown or be smashed to pieces on the rocks?

I was young, and strong, and all the world's doors were flung open before me. I could remain in the army. I could sail the seas. I could ask for a transfer to the air force. I could go home, back to the Donbas. I could do anything I wished. I had but to choose. Come on then, make your choice quickly, Sergei Bazhanov. You're a lad of twenty-three—it's high time you did!

The rafts, one after another, sailed down the Kura, and the old man at the tiller kept shouting:

"Haupthildi!" which means "Beware!"

* 4 *

"Of course, if anyone doesn't like it, he can refuse!" Pashchenko said curtly, looking hard at the faces around him.

Andrei and Victor were silent.

Of course, one could refuse. One could stand up and declare outright: "No, I don't want to!" Or one could dodge it by saying: "I don't mind, only my Mother's ill . . . she's old and lonely."

Yes, one could refuse, but how was one to face life afterwards, if at seventeen one funk'd and turned a deaf ear to the Komsomol's first call?

What boys of my age have not experienced that proud feeling: "I have been mobilized by the Party!" Not recruited, not employed, but mobilized!

We went into the navy, into the country, into the timber camps, as part of the mobilized one-thousanders and twenty-five-thousanders. We were "flung" on the grain front, the wood front and the railway front. The biographies of some of us read like an exclusive record of mobilizations; it was the record of our country, the geography of its lines and roads. We learned to be quick packers of our hold-alls. There was not a place where we did not acclimatize. Everywhere we were "our own people."

Andrei slowly raised his head and said quietly:

"We agree."

The words were out of his mouth before he realized it, but he felt it was the only thing to say.

The lanky Pashchenko flung his arms up in delight, and was the first to start clapping, his hands high over his head.

Andrei stood bewildered and confused. He could not make out what they were applauding him for and did not yet realize that this was the first big moment in his life, a moment he was often to recollect in future and in different ways.

After that came speeches, and Victor, suddenly roused, shouted fervidly that if it was miners the country needed, then here he was, a volunteer. . . . All the mobilized boys, except Andrei, spoke; Pashchenko made another speech, and then all, flushed and excited, trooped out into the street in a body to see the heroes home.

They walked down the middle of the street five abreast, with arms round each other, singing songs. It reminded

one of 1919. Leave-taking at the gate of the hero's house was an uproarious ceremony with a yelling chorus of cheers and lots of hilarity—only yesterday these boys and girls had been Pioneers; one young lass—the one who had asked: "Say, boys, where's the Donbas?"—even kissed Andrei in front of everybody, a heartfelt kiss which threw him into utter confusion and raised a roar of laughter. In the lives of those who were remaining this was a big moment, too, a landmark, a date they were always to remember. "That was when we saw our Komsomol boys off to the mines." Afterwards these send-offs grew more frequent. Answering their country's call boys left Chibiryaki for the big world to go to schools, to new construction jobs and into the army. The entire organization saw them off, as it had when Victor and Andrei left.

When they had all gone, Andrei tarried by the wicket before going into the house. He lingered under the quiet willows in the front garden, listening to the evening song of the gillyflowers. "So that's that!" he thought. "We're going to be miners." And his heart suddenly grew light and gay. The choice had been made. The future could take care of itself!

He went in and said to his father:

"The day after tomorrow we're going away." After a pause he added: "To the mines."

His father looked up, surprised.

"Where? Is that Victor's idea?" he demanded angrily.

"No. The Komsomol mobilized us."

"Ah!" His father got up and began pacing the room.

"Couldn't you refuse, perhaps it isn't too late?" he suggested uncertainly. "Can I do something about it?"

"No. You can't."

They fell silent again.

"It isn't for long, I suppose, is it, son?" his father said at length. "A month, maybe three?"

"I can't tell...."

His father went back to the bench and resumed his interrupted work. He was making a doll for his little girl; he was a handy man at everything.

"And I thought you'd go away and study," he said with a rueful smile. "While I can afford it. . . . Well, never mind." He bent low over the little wooden block and began painting in the eyes.

Victor, too, on coming home, told his mother straight-away that he was going to the mines.

"Woe is me!" she cried, flinging up her arms in despair.

But Victor checked her sharply:

"Mobilization, Ma."

She caught a familiar note in those words, and subsided. It had been the same with Victor's father; he would silence her womanish sighs and tears with a single word: Revolution. Or Mobilization. Order of the Revolutionary Committee.

She suppressed a sigh. One could not argue with the Revolutionary Committee. Hiding her silent tears from Victor, she immediately got busy making preparations for his journey.

All the next day was filled with the bustle and excitement of packing for the journey, baking buns and one thing and another. Andrei and Victor saw each other only for a moment at the Komsomol branch.

In the evening they met by accident outside the front gardens. Silently, of one accord, they walked down to the Psyol. Yesterday's quarrel was forgotten, and neither of them so much as mentioned it. Quarrels indeed! Their lots were cast together now, perhaps for ever.

They came to the bank of the Psyol and stood for a long time gazing silently at the river. It was not the river alone they were taking leave of—they were bidding farewell to their childhood. It had been a glorious time while it lasted. Their hearts were filled with gratitude for the

river, for their native fields and their home town. Now their working life was beginning. And beginning none too early at that. Andrei's father had earned his first crust of bread at the age of ten.

"People say it's terrible down in the mines!" Andrei said softly. "Even the horses go blind!"

"That's all bunk!"

"It isn't. They live down there—blind."

The water lapped the boat against the bank with a soft murmur.

"I'll become an *udarnik** the moment I get to the mine," Victor said boastfully. "We'll show them who we are!" He stretched his whole supple body with a jaunty air.

"I also heard say there are lots of gases in the pits," Andrei went on. "If you strike a match there'll be an explosion."

"Got the wind up already?" Victor said scornfully.

"Who, me?" Andrei said calmly. "No, I haven't."

Darkness had fallen and it was time to go home. Victor broke a twig off a broom shrub and threw it into the water.

"Sail away!"

They stood for a long time with bated breath, watching it float down the dark stream; no, it didn't sink! And now it was gone, swallowed up in the dark.

"There won't be such a river out there!" Andrei said with a sigh, and suddenly something seemed to catch at his throat.

"Ugh, sissy!" Victor spat in disgust and strode off.

Early the next morning the mobilized boys sallied forth, accompanied by a band. The cart with their luggage had gone on ahead. The boys had decided to walk to the station—it was only seven kilometres—and all the Komso-mol of the town had come to see them off.

* Shock-worker.—*Tr.*

The band stopped by the barrow and played a stirring march. The boys looked back at their home town for the last time, and saw roofs, roofs, and on those sun-bathed roofs, yellow pumpkins.

That was their last and lasting vision of home—golden pumpkins on tiled roofs. . . .

The long-legged poplars seemed to be striding down the *tchoomak* road, side by side with the boys. And then ran past the window of the railway carriage. It was the land of poplars, the Ukraine.

In Poltava the Chibiryakians changed over into a special train. It was already half-filled with boys from Kiev, from Chernigov, Zhitomir and Poltava; new parties kept coming in at every station, first Sumi Komsomol boys, then Kharkov boys; it seemed as if the whole Komsomol had risen to tackle coal. Andrei already knew that he and Victor were going out under the thirty-thousand assignment.

"Thirty thousand!" Victor crowed. "A regular army!"

They struck up acquaintances quickly. It was a merry, noisy, song-singing journey. They were surprised, looking out of the window, to see that the steppe here was exactly like that in Chibiryaki, and the fields too—already reaped and dotted with barrow-like golden ricks—the same smiling blue and white huts with painted shutters, the same well sweeps cocked in the air, and more poplars.

The landscape did not change even when the merry trainload ran into the Donets country. The same worm-wood steppe, the same poplars and clay little cottages.

"This isn't the Donbas, surely!" Victor cried disappointedly. "It can't be."

But the railway guards confirmed that it was. Krasni Liman, Yama, Artemovsk. . . The names spoke for themselves.

It was not until they had passed Nikitovka, towards the evening, that the windows lit up with an alarming glare. The boys rushed to the windows. No, it was not a fire, nor was it the sunset.

It was the boys' first breath-taking vision of the Donbas, which broke upon them in all its grandeur and power with a deafening din and flames, with clouds of thick black smoke hanging over the quenching towers, with the lurid glow of blast-furnace smeltings, with mysterious lights twinkling on the slag dumps and blue fires on the gley hills; with the bitterish smell of coal and the acrid-sweet smell of quenched coke; with the disturbing odours of gas, sulphur, iron and pyrites smouldering on the waste piles; with its hard, laboured breathing, as if all the blast engines, compressors and steam-power plants were unable to pump sufficient air into its gigantic iron lungs, and it puffed, wheezed and gasped painfully.

It was a many-chimneyed, majestic, shaggy and mysterious Donbas that presented itself to the boys in the flaming night.

"This is where we're going to work . . . and live," thought the boys with delight and awe. All eyes were glued on the carriage window as the Donbas, slowly and swayingly, sailed past.

* 5 *

It was some time before they became miners, however. At first they were guests. They were greeted with music and speeches. The local Komsomol leaders fussed around them, obviously anxious lest the novices did not like it here.

One of them, who bore a striking resemblance to Pashchenko, kept apologizing at every step—for the smoke, the dust, the scanty vegetation.

"Of course, it'll be hard until you get used to it," he said.

"Are you used to it?" Victor asked him.

"Me?" He smiled. "I was born here."

"And do you like it?"

"I like it!" Then, as if testing the statement, he looked round. His eyes warmed and grew still bluer. "That's our cottage, over there," he said. "Next to that acacia."

The boys were put up in a hostel.

"We haven't any private cupboards yet," the house-manager explained, "but they've been ordered. There'll be flowers, too, in tubs, everything shipshape."

Andrei chose two cots—for himself and Victor. He pinned up photographs. There were only three of them: the Voronko family in full force, with the infant Natasha in her mother's arms; a Pioneers' camp rally on the Psjol; Andrei in a group of seven-grade school graduates. They were all the photographs he had. Strictly speaking, they pretty well covered his whole life record.

Then he hung the towel with the crimson cocks his mother had embroidered over the photographs, and felt quite homey. Victor had brought no photographs with him.

People—acquaintances and strangers—kept coming all the evening to inquire whether the boys were comfortable and whether there was anything they needed. Then came a big burly man with a clean-shaven head and an authoritative bass.

"The pit chief!" the house-manager whispered to the boys and ran forward to meet the visitor. Presently the chief's voice boomed in all the corners.

"Never mind the cupboards! I want to see the drying-room. Where's the drying-room?"

"What's a drying-room for?" Andrei quietly asked the Komsomol boy who looked like Pashchenko.

"To dry the work clothes, footwraps. . . ."

"In rainy weather?"

The pit chief and the house-manager overheard this and laughed.

"It's always raining in the pit, my boy!" said the house-manager.

"Why always?" Pashchenko's double said defensively. "Not all the workings are wet. And generally"—flashing an angry look at the house-manager—"I'd advise you to drop your propaganda, Uncle Onisim. You're like a wet blanket."

"What are they, young ladies!" boomed the pit manager. "Are we to spray 'em with eau-de-Cologne? They must be told the truth straight out. Are you Komsomol members?" he shouted to the boys.

"We are," answered a straggly chorus.

"D'you know what you've come here for?"

"We can guess!" This time it was Victor who answered.

"You'd better!" The pit manager gave a rumbling laugh. He was a ruddy-faced jovial man.

The gaily uttered words struck a chill to Andrei's heart. It really was going to be tough, then!

The pit manager's words, however, appealed to Victor.

"When are we going to tumble in?" he shouted perkily. "What's the idea, leading us about like tourists? We're sick of it!"

"You don't tumble into mines, young chap," answered the pit manager. "Not unless you're sick in the head. You ride down."

"All right, when are we going to ride down?" Victor was not to be quelled.

"Soon. You're a zippy one, I see!" The pit manager laughed and suddenly drew Victor to him and embraced him. "If all these nippers are like you, we shan't do so bad, my dear chap!"

He went away and with him went all the visitors. The boys were left by themselves. They drifted off to their re-

spective cots. Andrei got a willow whistle out of his box and began blowing doleful noises out of it.

A dim sense of uneasiness weighed upon his mind. He could not account for it himself. So far they had seen nothing to upset them. People had given them a friendly welcome. Very likely the pit wasn't so terrifying as he thought. And yet he had misgivings. "Bitterly wept the Cossack in Turkish bondage," the whistle complained, as if of its own accord; Andrei wasn't thinking of what he was playing. He was thinking of home, of the pit, of how far away from home they were—even a letter would take a long time coming. "It's always raining in the pit!" the words suddenly flashed across his mind.

Victor sat down next to him and put his arm round his friend.

"Feeling down in the mouth, old Cossack?" he said gaily.

"I feel rotten, Victor," Andrei confessed quietly. "Rot-ten as can be."

"Is that so?" Victor was surprised. "Why?"

"I'm scared. . . ."

"Well, of all the silly asses!" laughed Victor. "Scared!" he mocked. "Where d'you think you are, in a jungle? Among wolves? If you ask me, it's damned jolly here, I like it. I like the folks too."

Bratchenko, a fair-headed youngster from Kobeliaki, came in with an armful of grass. He had been out in the steppe and plucked some grass.

"The steppe here is fine," he said, "just like at home. Only there isn't much of it. Shafts all round. And the steppe itself smells of smoke. . . ."

He strewed the grass over the floor, and the dormitory at once smelt of home—of savoury, mint and wormwood.

But it made everybody feel more homesick than ever. "I say, boys, let's sing a song!" someone suggested,

and started one. The others joined in. The song floated over the colliery town, as if it were the Psyl, the Vorskla, or the Dnieper. . . .

The song attracted the house-manager, Uncle Onisim. He leaned against the door jamb, listening with pleasure.

"You sing well!" he said at last. "You don't happen to hail from Kursk, do you?"

"No," several voices answered him. "We're from different places."

"Ah! I thought you were from Kursk. Mostly fellows from Kursk and Orel used to come out to the Donbas."

"Have you ever been down the mine, Uncle Onisim?" Andrei asked timidly.

"Who, me?" The house-manager swung round towards him. "I like that! What a question! Why, I've been in the mines for thirty years, I . . . I—" Indignation made him inarticulate.

"Then why have you been put on this job?"

"That's just what I say—why? It's all Butenko's doing. He's our chairman of the pit T.U. committee, the fuss-bones. Uncle Onisim's to blame because his blessed percentages don't work out. Been trying to get round me this last year. Got to give you a rise, Onisim, he says. It's rather awkward, an old miner like you. . . . What rise can you give me, I says, when I ain't educated enough? So he went and thought this job up."

"Why, is it better in the pit?" someone asked.

"You bet. Safer, too. Here, if the roof starts leaking, or take those cupboards—damn 'em—Uncle Onisim's hauled off to the chiefs right away, or to the district attorney—they chevy you about something wicked. Down in the mine it isn't half as dangerous. I'm a timberer!" This was said so proudly that one would think a timberer were a general. "Let's have another song, better!"

The boys started singing again. Uncle Onisim sat down on a stool and listened. When one song was over

he did not say anything, just grunted, wiped his tears away and sat waiting for more, his grey head propped up in his hands. They flowed on and on, those endless Ukrainian songs, sad and plaintive, and one's soul seemed to float and sing with them together. And there was such a magic in those songs that the most plaintive of them did not sadden a man, but on the contrary, comforted him seeming to draw all the anguish out of his heart and scatter it to the winds. . . .

"Yes, you sing splendidly!" Uncle Onisim said at last. He sighed, wiped his tears away and stood up. "But you won't make miners, no!"

This was so unexpected that everyone burst out laughing.

"What makes you think so, Uncle Onisim?" Victor cried, laughing.

"You won't. No!" the old man said with a hopeless gesture.

"But why?"

"Not the right leaven, that's why!"

"What? What?"

"Don't I know you—mother's darlings, cry-babies! Why, you'll do bunk after the third shift. . . . As if I don't know your sort!"

"No we won't!" indignant voices were raised.

"Oh, tell me another one!" the old man said scornfully. "We've seen your likes before. Everyone says—hitch, hitch—but what's the reason for the hitch? You're the reason, miners like you. We"—he suddenly thumped his chest—"we didn't have any hitches in '21. We ate grass, we did, but there weren't any hitches. We worked. Gave coal. And now, Christ Almighty, look what they've done to the Donbas! Turned it into an inn yard, that's what they've done. Here today, gone tomorrow. You're no miners! You'll hang around the colliery for a while, then ta-ta!"

He spoke with such warmth and conviction that everyone was rendered speechless.

Only one lad, who had maintained a gloomy silence all the time—his name was Svetlichny and he hailed from Kharkov—went up to the house-manager and said quietly but sternly:

"What are you croaking for, old man, trying to put the wind up people?"

"I'm not croaking," the house-manager brushed him off, "it makes my heart bleed to see what's going on."

"You don't have to croak about it then!" He gave the old man a quelling glance and turned to the boys: "Now then, boys! The old man here says we'll run away. What do you say?"

"Time will show!" someone shouted.

"There have been all sorts here," said Uncle Onisim. "Recruited men and volunteers. Now mobs of ex-kulaks are blowing into the Donbas to make big money...."

"He's comparing us to the kulaks," Svetlichny went on in a level voice. "What d'you say about that?"

"Punch him on the nose!" came a suggestion from out of the far corner. "Maybe he's a kulak stooge himself."

Hot-headed Malchenko darted forward, shouting:

"You don't seem to understand we're Komsomol members, old man. Komsomol!"

"We've seen 'em too."

"What right have you to think that of us!" Victor suddenly cried shrilly, rushing up to the house-manager with murder in his eye. "Who are you? Come on, tell us—who are you?"

The whole room was shouting now. The boys jumped off their cots and bore down on the old man. Svetlichny, however, checked them with a single imperious gesture. The boys at once sensed a leader in him; later it transpired that he had been Secretary of a Komsomol branch and had volunteered to go out to the Donbas. "The best

propaganda is personal example," he was said to have remarked at the time.

He was older and taller than the rest of the boys. Long-armed, with a high lumpy forehead, grim bushy eyebrows and snapping eyes, he was terrible at that moment, although outwardly he looked the coolest of them all.

"So this is how you meet us!" he said quietly to the old man. "Talk about cupboards. . . ."

"But don't you see," stammered the house-manager,—he, too, sensed the commanding force of this lad—"how sore it makes us regulars feel to watch this coming and going. I can't replace the blankets fast enough—they walk away with 'em. Now take your farming job, say—how would you like it if every blessed passer-by, every cow and measly goat was to walk through your garden or courtyard, say?"

"There's something in that," Svetlichny said, turning to the boys. "Maybe there are some among us who mean to run away? Eh?" He eyed them sternly and everyone shrank under his prickly gaze.

"Well, who?" he continued. "Step out and say so. It isn't too late yet. Well? You?" He jabbed a finger at Bratchenko, who backed away, startled.

"Who, me?" he cried.

"Or you?"—his finger pointed at Andrei. "Who then? You? You? You?"—the accusing finger made its jabbing round. "So there's no one. If there is I'll wring his neck!" he hissed, then turned to the house-manager. "Well, old man, there are no deserters here."

"Let's hope so," Uncle Onisim said with a shake of his head.

It was a long time before Andrei fell asleep that night. He kept tossing about on his narrow cot. It had been a trying day, what with all that talk, those hints

and jokes; with everyone afraid of their running away; Uncle Onisim; the near breath of that fearsome—he knew it now for certain—that terrifying pit; and worst of all the jabbing finger of Svetlichny.

Andrei had no intention of running away. He knew that was impossible, a shameful thing to do. The very idea had not occurred to him till now. How could he run away, when he himself had said at the meeting in Chibiryaki: “We agree!”

But Svetlichny had not wagged a threatening finger and Uncle Onisim voiced his doubts for nothing. Did that mean it was so terrible down the mine? What was to be done about it?

“I’ll do whatever I’m told, right and proper,” he vowed. “I’ll obey everyone. I’ll stick it out, I won’t run away. I only hope I’ll have enough guts for it.”

His thoughts turned to Victor with hope. In case of anything Victor would back him, stand by him! Victor was a game lad, a daredevil. Victor was a tower of strength! He had guts enough for two!

“Vitya, Victor!” he called softly.

But Victor was fast asleep. If he did dream of the mine, it was of a jolly, rosy affair, flooded with spangled sunshine. Victor even smiled and pursed up his eyes in his sleep, as if dancing sunbeams were playing over his face.

* 6 *

Not until the fourth day were the Komsomol boys told that tomorrow they were going down into the mine. Andrei turned pale. Victor was overjoyed.

Up till then they had been shown over the surface gear—the shaft house, the hoist engine, the tippie, the pit bank, the creaky trestle, the stint room, the lamp cabin, the washery and even the change-house.

Victor had looked at all this unmoved, almost with disgust. He was burning with impatience to go down into the pit, "inbye," as they called it here.

"We're going to work underground!" he boasted to Andrei. "D'you realize it? Underground!" That word now had for him the same thrilling ring as "under water" or "up in the clouds." He considered that a miner's job was the next best thing to an airman's, a deep-sea diver's, or a fireman's.

"Fighting the elements!" he exclaimed. "That's where you need men with pluck!"

And he looked upon the miners with admiration.

They came to the surface wet and black, like devils out of the nether regions. They sauntered through the colliery settlement with that easy rolling gait characteristic of the independent workman going home, conscious of a good day's work and his legitimate right to relaxation, to the fussy attentions of his wife, to a bowl of rich *borshch* and a goodly glass of vodka.

Some of them carried on their shoulders a billet of wood on the edge of an axe; that, too, was a time-honoured privilege of the miner. One pit prop belonged to him—to heat the water up at home for his bath. There had long been an excellent change-house at the pit, but the privilege remained. Some men still preferred a bath at home.

They walked through the colliery town entirely unembarrassed, rather proud, if anything, of their black faces and dirty clothes. It was coal on their faces, not dirt—precious coal, the cleanest thing in the world; a miner even heals cuts and wounds with coal. They had hewed that coal all day, breathed it, lived for it, hoisted it to the surface—all for you people on the surface, to make life warmer for you on the cold uncomfortable earth.

From constant crawling and wriggling over the coal the miner's clothes were quickly worn to rags, but they

were the most picturesque rags in the world. They were coated with soft velvety coal-dust, and the miner wore them as if they were black velvet. So it seemed to Victor, as he gazed at those grimy men with rapture.

"You just look at them!" he whispered to Andrei. "Look at their eyes! See how they gleam! Not everyone can work in the mine, my dear chap. It wants a brave man."

Indeed, the effect of dazzling teeth and whites of eyes in the black faces made all the miners, even the girls, look brave, dashing and reckless.

"Plucky devils!" Victor went into raptures. "Playing blind man's buff with death every day!"

It all depends how one looks at things; Andrei, looking at the same miners, merely saw honest tired men coming from work, probably eager for a meal and a quiet smoke in the cool of the acacia in the front garden. Somehow they strongly resembled Andrei's father.

Next day the boys would be going down into the mine. At the hostel that evening they talked of nothing else. Brand-new dungarees, boots and footwraps were brought to the hostel and distributed among them. Uncle Onisim was there, of course. He explained the use of each article, gave advice and told all kinds of stories. He seemed to have grown younger and livelier in the boys' company; his yarns were a quaint blend of the useful and the fantastic.

"The main thing in the pit, my boys, is to mind your heads," he admonished. "Don't hold your head high, otherwise you'll bump it against the roof. The pit likes a man to bow to her, she's our bread-giver. . . ." He always called the pit "our bread-giver," "the Old Lady"; it was a living creature to him; this "she" liked, that "she" didn't like. "As for smoking, God forbid! Leave your matches at home. She won't stand any nonsense. Our 'Steep Maria' is a serious old lady, a gas pit."

"Are there many explosions?" Victor asked eagerly.

"Oh, no, God is merciful! Once in a while there's a pop, but that's nothing," the old man laughed. "Just Shubin larking about."

"Shubin? Who's he?"

"Shubin?" chuckled the house-manager. "That needs some explaining. It's tommyrot, of course. The old men thought it up. Some sort of creature is supposed to haunt the pits, prowls about and frightens the miners—Shubin, they call him. He lives in the outlying workings or in the derelict shafts. Well, the story is, if anyone meets him he's as good as dead—sure to be caught in a fall!"

"What is he, a sort of miner's god, or what?"

"Oh, there are all kinds of stories abroad," the old man said evasively. "There was supposed to have been a miner in the old days by the name of Shubin. They say the colliery boss didn't like him on account of his temper. He was a sight too bold, independent like. So the boss started putting the screw on him. He tried all ways. To cut a long story short, he exploited the man, that's all! The boss was a German, you know. They all were in those days—either Germans, or Belgians or Frenchmen. . . . Foreign capital. Well, that German put the screw on so tight that Shubin went right off the rails—took to drink. One day, when he was a bit pot-valiant, he gave the boss a piece of his mind. 'What right have you to suck the blood of us miners?' he says. And the boss hollers: 'I'm the boss! I do what I please!' 'Ah, you are, are you?' Shubin says. 'All right, I'll show you who's the boss here!' And that was the last anyone ever heard of him. Some say he died a natural death, others say he went down the pit drunk and touched off an explosion. Blew up the whole pit. And himself along with it. But before long he turned up again, people saw him here, there. . . . And wherever he showed up there were explosions, creeps, sits and floodings. That was Shubin"—Uncle Onisim held

up a significant finger—"showing who the real boss was!" He chuckled and wagged his head with evident pleasure.

"And is he still prowling about the pits?" Victor asked in a whisper—he was even ready to believe in Shubin.

"Now?" Uncle Onisim gave a sly wink. "No, when the bosses were kicked out in 1917, Shubin disappeared too. Knocked off. Hasn't been seen since."

"Well, of all the—" laughed Malchenko. "Folks have myths as myths go—devils, pixies, fairies and suchlike. Here it's a drunken miner!"

"No, it isn't that," said Svetlichny, who had listened to the story with interest. "What about you, Uncle Onisim—do you believe in this Shubin?"

"Me? What d'you take me for?" the house-manager sounded offended. "I'm not too strong a believer in God, let alone Shubin. I'm not that ignorant."

"Did you ever come across Shubin yourself?" Svetlichny pursued, nothing daunted.

"Foolish talk again!" the old man flared up. "How could I have met him when I'm still alive? Those who meet him are goners!"

"There," grinned Svetlichny, "and you say you don't believe it."

Everyone saw Svetlichny's trap and burst out laughing.

Uncle Onisim got up without saying a word and stalked out of the room.

"He's offended!" Victor whispered, and on a sudden impulse he jumped up and ran after the old man.

Everyone sat up late that night. Bratchenko brought in some more grass from the steppe, scattered it over the floor and lay down on his cot, face downwards.

"So he's scared of the pit too," thought Andrei. He wanted to go up to him, talk to him, and cheer him up, but he changed his mind. He felt none too bright himself.

There were no songs that evening. Victor succeeded in dragging Uncle Onisim back. Svetlichny apologized to him publicly.

"I'm not angry!" the house-manager said importantly, and the next minute he was off on his stories again. Andrei did not listen, however. He lay on his cot, thinking: "So it's tomorrow!"

In the morning the boys put on their pit clothes and looked quite unlike their former selves. The dungarees were brand-new and still had the smell of warehouse damp about them. They were uncomfortable and stiff, as if made of bark instead of tarpaulin. Victor was the only one who found them "nice and cozy"; had it been a diving suit he would have got into it with still greater pleasure. He put the peaked cap on backwards, the way he had seen the timber-pushers wear it; this imparted a still jauntier air to his impudent, defiant face.

The foreman, an old man, came for the boys. He looked at them, sighed, then waved his hand:

"Come along!"

They tailed after him like so many chicks after a brood hen, right across the colliery town. "We'll go this way every morning now!" thought Andrei. "It's our road now." He thought everyone was looking at them with amusement.

"Aren't they sweet and tidy!" a woman at the pump was heard to remark as they passed.

The foreman brought the boys to the lamp cabin. They filed past the little window one by one, gave their names and received a lamp. The lamps were already primed and burning. Out in the sunshine their lights looked wan, pitiful and futile. "What light can this give?" Andrei thought with fear.

"Have you all got your lamps?" the foreman asked. He was worried and taciturn—not at all like Uncle Onisim.

"Now take care!" he said sternly. "Keep close on my heels in the pit! You may lose yourselves for all I know." He eyed them over severely and said: "Well, come along!"

They followed him across the yard, then went up a sort of covered gallery. It was in semi-gloom. The window-panes were thickly coated with coal-dust. There was coal-dust on the floor and on the walls, and even on the boys' faces—Andrei could feel it on his teeth.

At the pit mouth they had to wait a bit—the cage was down below. Here at the shaft house several girls were busy banking out the coal. They examined the novices with frank curiosity and cracked jokes among themselves at their expense. Collier girls are bold, pert things, especially when there are several of them together. Victor winked at them and set them laughing.

The cage came up. There was such a clang of iron that it made Andrei start. The bankswoman, a hefty female with a pock-marked face, pushed a tub loaded with coal out of the cage. Chalked on it in big letters was: "Greetings, Nyura!"

"Hi, Nyura!" the bankswoman shouted. "Here's a letter for you. Registered!" She gave the tub a push and it went bouncing over the rails.

The girls laughed, and one of them, evidently Nyura, received the tub in considerable confusion.

"Oh, he's a nuisance, that fellow!" she said with a toss of her head, and sent the tub rolling on towards the pit bank. The foreman went up to the bankswoman.

"Look here," he said worriedly, "you give the signal to go easy. See what passengers I have"—he swung his lamp in the boys' direction.

"What are they, china-ware?" the woman laughed. "Look at them! They ought to be taken down with a zoom. Have you got wives and children, boys?"

Nevertheless she gave the required signal—four strokes on the bar, which meant: careful, guests!

The four strokes sounded like a death knell in Andrei's ears. He was not the only one to turn pale; Bratchenko was as white as a sheet. One of the girls, noticing this, started laughing and began to sing roguishly:

*He went down the mine without a map,
And never came up again, poor chap.*

"Now then!" the foreman shook his lamp at her threateningly. "Walk in, boys."

They went into the cage as if they were stepping into cold water.

"Squeeze up!" the foreman commanded. He went in last. "Good luck!" The cage shot down with a jerk. At once it grew damp. Water started dripping from somewhere. Andrei felt a thin cold trickle snaking down the back of his neck. "It's always raining in the pit," he recollected.

The cage was dropping swiftly into the dark void.

"Woosh! I'm scared to death!" Victor squealed with mock terror. Everyone smiled involuntarily—even Andrei. "A journey to the centre of the earth, by Jules Verne."

"I've been making that journey for forty years," the foreman said. "Never mind, you'll get used to it."

"I'm used to it already!" Victor said.

Meanwhile the cage shot down and down, and it seemed as if the descent would never end. Andrei's familiar world receded farther and farther; peaceful Chibiryaki, the golden pumpkins on the roofs, his childhood, his father squatting by the vegetable beds—it seemed to him as if all this had never been. He would never see it again, never!

A dazzling light suddenly flooded the cage, which came to a stop with a bump.

"Here we are!"

Andrei jumped out first, and landed right under a shower. It was a wet welcome. He shook himself sheepishly and moved away from the shaft to a dry spot.

"Well, how do you like our underground kingdom?" the foreman said in a kindly tone one would not have expected from him, then chuckled in an old man's way. Underground, he seemed quite a different person. He was at home here. And he wanted these youngsters to feel at home here too.

He said, almost ingratiatingly:

"The pit's a beauty, although she is an old lady. She and I are the same age!"

Andrei had noticed before that the old men always spoke affectionately of their pit. He did not know whether it was love or superstition, but they never said a bad word about it, although they carried many a scar from cuts and bruises the "bread-giver" had doled out to them. Only yesterday Uncle Onisim had sighed: "Oh, she's taken it out of me, sucked me dry, that dear old lady has!" The boys knew by now that Uncle Onisim had been "promoted" because he was no longer able to work in the mine. He had acute anthracosis—a miner's complaint. "I have a tubful of coal in each lung!" he boasted whimsically, and yet he yearned for the mine.

And now they were here, in the pit, which had been occupying Andrei's mind all these days and nights. He looked about him. The brilliantly lit pit bottom presented a scene of noisy activity. The onsetter, a young girl, was working by the shaft, right under the shower. In her rainproof coat and big black hat, which were shining wet, she looked like a sailor in a storm, the wet flagstones under her feet serving as the deck. She was an attractive, nimble girl, and Andrei was not the only one who cast admiring glances in her direction.

From somewhere out of the darkness a "batch" rushed up with a clang and roar. The shock-haired horse-putter gave a piercing whistle and jumped off the tub.

"Hi, Lyuba!" he shouted boisterously. "Receive the batch, ducky."

Andrei edged up to the horse. It stood with drooping head, half dozing. He gently patted its mane. A sudden desire came over him to put his arms round its neck and to whisper softly into its ear: "Well, how do you like it here? Hard? How do they treat you? I've been mobilized, see." He patted its neck again. The horse raised its head and looked at him out of kind, intelligent, gentle eyes. It was not blind.

All the fears of yesterday suddenly fell away from him, vanished, as if all that was needed to dissipate them was the sight of that horse with the seeing eyes. He laughed and began to see the world around him in a different light. It really was an underground kingdom! The low cave-like vaults, the lights, the men in hooded cloaks, resembling gnomes—it was all fantastic and beautiful. Yes, beautiful!—he found to his own surprise.

"Well, come along," the foreman said at last. "Mind you don't lag behind!"

He went forward with the light tread of the miner, stepping noiselessly on his toes, his shoulders slightly bent and head drawn in. The boys blundered after him, groping and stumbling like blind helpless kittens. They weren't able to hold the lamps properly yet, and the light fell somewhere behind instead of in front.

Gradually they got used to the darkness and began to distinguish objects. They saw a rut, a ditch, in which underground water gurgled softly, walls made of logs, a timbered roof.

They were walking through a drift. What they took to be the ceiling and walls was merely propping, the work of Uncle Onisim or his mates. Had the old man been

there, he would have told them that the timbering here had been done, as usual, with a three-stick set: that top bar, the "mother-post," was the roof, those side props were the walling, and if there had been another lower bar for the floor it would be called a four-stick set. The props here were set in dovetail framing—see how strong and sturdy they were! Those props supported the whole overhanging weight of the earth, and but for Uncle Onisim the whole darned thing would come crashing down. . . .

But Victor would not have listened to him just then. He walked through the mine spellbound. His fervid imagination transported him to an underground palace or a medieval castle. All round were colonnades, and an endless vista of palatial doors flung wide open. And through all those chambers Miner Victor the First made his stately progress, vaulted arches fell back before the light of his lamp, and door after door opened noiselessly and mysteriously as in a fairy tale.

"Smells of mushrooms," Andrei's voice next to him broke the spell.

"What?"

"Smells of mushrooms," Andrei repeated wonderingly.

"Just smells mouldy," Svetlichny's harsh voice sounded out of the dark.

"No, mushrooms!" Andrei insisted.

Like Victor, and probably like all the other boys, who had become suddenly subdued in the pit, Andrei felt as if he had been transported from the familiar everyday world into fairyland

He had a feeling as if he stood in the middle of a forest. Not an ordinary forest like the blue one across the Psjol, but an enchanted forest; he had a dim recollection of having heard about it ages and ages ago. Perhaps it was in childhood? From his grandmother?

In that underground forest there were no trees or branches, no leaves, no rustling ferns underfoot, no grassy murmurings or twittering of birds. The bare trunks here did not stir, and there were no nests on them nor even bark.

A sleeping, petrified, charmed forest. And here underground there flowed the River of Life: he who bathed in it would live for ever.

What had they been when alive, those bare trunks? Trees, men, giants? In this enchanted forest everything was unusual. It was interesting and a bit terrifying to roam here.

"Hey, mind your heads!" the foreman shouted back.

Andrei ducked just in time. Before him hung a broken beam. It dangled like the fractured arm of a giant, and farther on were more dangling beams; it looked like the scene of a recent battle or as if a furious storm had swept through the forest.

"What's this from?" a frightened voice came out of the darkness—Bratchenko's, Andrei thought.

"Pressure," the foreman briefly explained. "Creeps!"

The word had a sinister sound and the boys froze into silence.

The earth was "pressing" (a miner would have said the strata)! Pressing on top, pressing on the sides; Andrei noticed that in some places the upright props, too, were squeezed out of line, and looked like wounded men who had dropped on one knee. The exposed bed glistened dully and menacingly.

Their situation suddenly struck Andrei forcibly. They were deep down in the bowels of the earth. A handful of helpless youngsters and a puny old man. They were walking through a man-made tunnel, driven straight into the bedrock. Nothing around them but similar manways. And above them hung the whole vast mass of roused and

resentful earth. And that pigmy, man, had intruded into this underground kingdom, disturbed the age-old peace of those mighty strata, interfered with the smooth flow of those stony rivers—if they wanted to, they could easily crush him like a fly. Could those wretched pine props withstand their mighty pressure? The thought sent a little shiver up Andrei's spine.

The foreman stopped and turned to the boys.

"Feeling tired, boys?" he asked kindly.

The novices huddled round him at once like a flock round the shepherd.

"A bit," Svetlichny confessed.

"All right, then let's have a rest," the old man said, and squatted down on his heels collier-fashion. The boys threw themselves on the ground. It was damp.

"Yes, this gallery needs repairing badly," the foreman muttered, tapping a prop with his lamp—the rot-dust flew from it. "Even pine isn't strong enough! Can't stand the climate down here, it rots." He tapped the props again like a piano tuner; they gave off a hollow unhealthy sound. He eyed the boys quizzically and added: "But I've been in the pit forty years, and I'm all right. Still alive and kicking!" He slapped his knees gleefully.

"And not rotting?" Victor laughingly intoned.

"No fear!" the old man gave an ecstatic squeal.

Everyone laughed. Andrei too.

"A man isn't a pine!" the foreman laughed. "A man can do anything! My advice to you boys is—don't hang down your heads at the outset. Everything's difficult at the outset, even drinking vodka."

"A man can do anything! How wonderfully true that is!" Andrei thought with a thrill. "Nothing can stop a man and he's not afraid of anything. Yes, but what about me?" He recollected with dismay all his former fears. "What kind of a man am I, scared of everything?" And he felt annoyed with himself.

They were walking through galleries, drifts and man-ways, and there seemed to be no end to this journey towards the navel of the earth. The place seemed deserted and only at rare intervals did they come across anyone. Now and then the yellow wolf's eye of a lamp would gleam somewhere on the side, where a repairman was tinkering at the rails or where a girl was sitting by the air door, looking bored. The door would bang to with a noise like a cannon shot as the boys went past, and then again silence and emptiness would reign.

So far the boys had not seen a single man handling coal; for that matter they had not seen any coal either. Nothing but the dark dome of the roof overhead and the pine props all round, as if it really was a forest they were roaming in and not a mine.

An uncanny stillness reigned here, unlike the stillness of a forest; there were no murmurs or wind stirrings, nothing but the faint crackle of the pine props and somewhere far away the babble of water.

Andrei enjoyed the stillness; it helped one to think. He had always loved quiet, but to Victor this quiet was unbearable. He was already tired of this endless pageant of wide-flung doors. He was impatient to get to the scene of battle, where miners were hewing the coal, blasting the seams with dynamite, standing face to face with death.

He asked querulously:

"Will we ever get to the place where they're hewing coal?"

"We'll get there, son!" the foreman answered cheerfully, and explained, as though apologizing: "She's an old lady, this pit, and the workings are far out."

"If the workings are far out the men should be transported there," Svetlichny said gruffly. "Look how much precious time and energy the miner wastes until he gets to the working face."

"What d'you suggest, running a tramcar service?" the foreman said sarcastically.

Everyone laughed.

"I don't know about a tramcar," Svetlichny went on coolly, "but the men ought to be taken to the place. That's why you've got hitches here. From what I can see they're running this show by primitive methods, the stone-age way. That's how they worked when Adam was a boy. Not a sign of mechanization anywhere." He spat in disgust.

"Ah, mechanization!" the foreman suddenly sang out in a shrill malicious voice, pulling up sharp. His face looked hurt and small, like a child's. "There," he said, addressing no one in particular, "they invent a word and play with it. They can invent words, but not machines! Why don't you invent a machine!" He waved his lamp furiously under Svetlichny's nose. "Invent a machine that will crawl round all the galleries and crannies itself, find the coal itself, look after the roof and the gas, cut the coal itself, load it, and hoist it out—then you can sweep us old gaffers out of here with a broom." Obviously it was not Svetlichny he was arguing with; he was carrying on an old dispute.

"You can invent any machine," Svetlichny muttered.

"Oh, no you can't!" the old man shouted. "Don't you believe it! The mine isn't a factory! Conditions are different! A machine's no good here, no sir! If it hits the wrong place, you'll have a fall; if it shoots a spark by accident, you'll have a gas explosion. No," he laughed maliciously, "you give us a machine here with a head and brains in it, a machine with ears to hear the propping when it creaks, with a nose—"

"That's what a man's for—to control the machine."

"Ah! A man!" the foreman chortled triumphantly. "So without a man it's no go, eh? That's just it!" He waved his lamp as if he had got the best of the argument and

wound up calmly: "No, it's sheer laziness with you young people, that's what it is. Folks have grown a sight too lazy," he laughed. "Want somebody else to do their work for them, a machine, while they sit around it, having a smoke. That trick won't work in the pit, oh, no! Here a fellow has to take it on his hump, down on his knees."

Svetlichny did not remonstrate with the old man. Not, as Andrei guessed, because he was beaten, but simply because he did not want to waste his breath. Idle talk would not mend matters. After Svetlichny had settled down here and got the hang of things, Andrei thought, he would take them all in hand. He was that kind!

Wandering down the gallery, he was now thinking about Svetlichny. Andrei had a habit, ever since he was a child, of mulling over to himself all that he had heard or seen during the day. Some hidden mechanism seemed to be constantly at work within him, like a set of millstones slowly grinding over the impressions of the day; they ground hard, long and painfully, but they made a thorough job of it. It was not what Svetlichny had said about mechanization that surprised him. It was the mere fact that Svetlichny had so boldly started the argument. That he should dare argue about mining! Like Andrei, this was the first time he had ever been down a mine, and he had seen no more there than Andrei had seen. But to Andrei this was a mine as all mines go and everything was as it should be. It was probably the ordinary run of things.

As for Svetlichny, the very words—established rule, set form, and run of things, put his back up; they made him furious. He was of the carpenter breed of people, those restless people who are always set on mending things, improving them, remaking them. Not breaking them, but *remaking*. If a man like that found himself on the

moon, he would promptly get busy there with his hatchet too. Now, what about those craters, couldn't we mend them and remake them to make human life here possible?

Men of this breed had always excited Andrei's astonishment and admiration; he envied them; he himself, alas, was so unlike them! But he always felt unaccountably drawn towards them—in Chibiryaki towards Pashchenko, here towards Svetlichny.

More often than not these people belonged to the Party. Those tenacious lads had the happy knack of quickly grasping things—essence and detail. They took everything to heart. They were at home everywhere. And although Svetlichny's frowning brows frightened Andrei, he felt irresistibly drawn to him. It is impossible to live without an ideal at eighteen.

In one thing, if none other, Svetlichny was undoubtedly right—the miners ought to be transported to their place of work. Andrei saw that clearly now. They had not reached the working face, and were already fagged out. Their bodies ached all over, especially their backs; they had been walking bent double all the time, like penknives, to avoid bumping their heads on the low overhanging roof. They found it harder to breathe, and the bitter-sour air only irritated one's throat; it made one want to spit it out at once, but there wasn't any other (Andrei did not know that they were now walking through the return airway by which the used air was drawn to the upcast shaft). His heart beat painfully, and this was the first time in his life that Andrei felt he had one.

Sticky oozy sweat dripped down his face, got into his eyes and mouth, and he kept wiping the salt taste away with the sleeve of his prickly dungarees.

"I only hope I don't drop or fall behind, it would be a disgrace," he thought, as he stumbled on. "Is it still a long way to go? Oh, I won't make it!"

"In the pit, my dear boy, you've got to learn everything over again, like a child, even how to walk!" Uncle Onisim's words came back to him. But would he ever learn it? Would he ever get used to it? Once more doubts and fears assailed him. When would he be rid of them?

"Here we are!" the foreman's voice sounded somewhere far ahead.

Lights could already be distinguished out there in the dark. A few more steps brought Andrei into a broad and spacious drift.

Ah, that was better! Here were people, movement, life. And fresh air. Andrei took several greedy gulps at it and felt his head reel—how sweet, delicious and intoxicating it was! The air in the steppe could not come up to it!

"Here we are in the Far Western, boys!" the foreman announced almost solemnly.

There was not a bead of sweat on his dry wrinkled face, and he did not look a bit tired.

"Are we going down to the face?" Victor asked.

"We are, God willing," the old man said genially. "You're going to see everything today. And tomorrow you'll get into harness. High time, too. You've been eating colliery bread this fifth day."

"We'll earn our bread!" Victor said in a hurt tone.

"I didn't mean it as a rebuke," the foreman explained. "Well, are you all here?" he said, running his eye over the group of novices. "No one lagged behind? Good! Now we're going down to the working, boys. The working's the place where the mineral is worked, that is, coal. The place we're going to has ten benches. The seam, as I dare say you've been told, is a high dip seam, that's to say, steeply inclined. The working faces are arranged in benches. But you'll see all that in practice, down in the working. Among ourselves we call it the field," he said with a smile. "Yes . . . the field. We weren't born underground, let me tell you!" he added with a sort of challenge. "We

lived up on the ground, we did. Farming. That's where the field comes in. True, we don't plough it, but there you are—it's a memory. You know how the song goes:

*The miner doesn't plough,
The field he doesn't stub,
As soon as he gets his pay—*"

"Off he goes to the pub! Yes, we know that song!" Svetlichny snorted.

"What's wrong with it!" The old man sounded offended. "You can't throw the words out of a song."

"No, but you can throw the pub out!"

Everyone laughed.

"It has been thrown out!" the foreman said, joining in the laugh. "We're teetotallers these days, people of the new life. We've kicked out the old class and gargle our throats with *kvass*. Joking apart, though, let's be going."

"But where?" Malchenko cried.

"Here!" the foreman briefly explained, pointing to what looked like a crack in the strata. He hooked his lamp on to his jacket to keep his hands free (the boys mechanically followed suit), then got down on all fours, and shouting: "Of we go!", dived into the hole.

All the others crawled in after him.

* 7 *

"So this is where the pit begins!" Andrei thought. He crawled along in the dark, seeing nothing, wriggling like a worm, one minute striking his knees painfully against the props, the next bumping his head on the low roof. In front and behind, knocking heads and knees, squirmed the rest of the boys, all panting and puffing. It occurred to Andrei that they were wriggling into the seam just like

a worm eating into a tree through an almost invisible opening which it had gnawed itself. Did that worm think it had conquered the tree, that it was the lord of Nature?

Nonsense, the worm thought nothing! A man was not a worm. A man could do anything! But weren't they crawling like worms? What if they were! It was because they didn't have real mechanization here yet. But you wait till Svetlichny started tackling them! Even so, what machine would be able to crawl through here? It was all a man could do to squeeze through. But you could invent any machine. Yes, but who was to invent it? No doubt they had already tried. Perhaps he would invent it himself some day, Andrei thought, and was amazed at his own audacity.

He even stopped for a second. Wouldn't it be wonderful if he of all people invented that machine! He could work out the idea, and people would catch on, Svetlichny would help. The thought delighted him; he even found the crawling easier; the tunnel seemed to have widened out and the roof seemed higher, sky-like.

But the worm of doubt began to stir in him.

"How can you invent it? You're not an engineer!" the worm squeaked. "What of it! I can become one," the man remonstrated. "Yes, but that means a lot of study. You'll never be able to do it!" the worm gnawed away. "I'll study! I will! I will!"

He pushed furiously ahead in the dark. No, he would not run away from here! He would stick it out. He would get to know everything in the mine. You couldn't scare him, oh, no!

Afterwards he would go away to study. He was a man, not a worm.

This was another big moment in Andrei's life, and again he failed to see it. He merely thought: "I'll have to tell Victor all about it today. He's got a better head than me. We'll plan it out together—how to live and study."

A boy of the year 1930, he realized that one could not live without a plan.

Victor was crawling on somewhere far ahead. Rather he was swimming like an experienced swimmer in a new unfamiliar river. He enjoyed it; the lower the roof the better; the greater the danger the more fun it was. "If I was to tell them in Chibiryaki how they mine coal here, they'd be flabbergasted!" he thought exultantly. Tomorrow he'd be hewing coal himself—he'll show them! A swing of the pick and he'd clear a tunnel, a twist of the wrist and there'd be a lane. He was a strong, dexterous fellow; even now he crawled along better than any of them; and he was the least tired of them all. He'd show what stuff he was made of!

What surprised him, though, was that there were no people here in the working.

"Isn't this the working?" he asked loudly.

"No," the foreman's voice came from somewhere nearby. "This is the staple. Here's the working face. Come here!"

Victor quickly crawled up to him and they both began waving their lamps for the boys to assemble. They all came up, panting and gasping.

"This way!" commanded the foreman and crawled off again to the side. Presently his cheerful old voice came back: "Here we are!"

He waited until the rest crawled up.

"Is everybody here?" he asked solemnly. "Well, have a look at our field, here it is." He raised his lamp aloft. Victor, then all the others, raised their lamps too.

At last the boys saw coal.

The light of the lamps flickered on its glistening surface as on water, and it looked like a black, sluggish, gleaming river, reflecting back the dancing lights, then dropping away, down into a chasm, where one hardly dared to peep.

"This is a fine thick seam," the foreman said lovingly, chipping off a bit of coal and rubbing it with slow relish between his fingers, the way a peasant caresses his land. "Rich seam. Called 'Arshinka.' That means it's an arshin* from ground to roof."

"And in that arshin men work!" thought Andrei, glancing down. He saw a straight row of pillar-like props supporting the roof; each prop was an arshin, too. Farther everything was lost in the darkness, which the light from their lamps was too feeble to penetrate. Somewhere on the right a pick was tapping away with a measured dogged rhythm, hewing the coal. "Like a woodpecker!" Andrei thought.

So this was the working, the miner's "field"—a long crevice, where the crouching hewers cut away at their benches, an endless row of props holding up the roof, a stream of coal slowly sliding downwards, and from ground to roof one arshin.

"So this is where we're going to work!" Andrei thought. "All right, it suits me." Now, when the dim but alluring light of a tangible dream already glimmered before him in the distance, all his fears were dispelled.

"Well, boys," the foreman said, "we're now going down the working. Pit mechanics here is this: sit down on what you always sit and slide down feet first. Don't be afraid! You won't fall. Grip the props, and feel for the lower ones with your feet. Get me? I'll drop two of you at every bench as we go along. You just sit and watch the miners at work, try to get the hang of it. On my way out I'll pick you all up again. Is that clear?" He paused, then waved his lamp. "Well, good luck! Off you go!"

And they slid down on their seats, as they used to do in childhood when they went tobogganing without sleds. It was exciting and a bit terrifying; they rushed down,

* Arshin--28 inches.—*Tr.*

feeling for the props in passing. Victor's boots ran into someone's neck, and the sufferer yelled: "Hi, careful, damn you!" The next minute he burst out laughing himself—he sailed into someone lower down.

"Now keep to the right!" the foreman's voice came up.

The boys turned to the right, in the direction of the light and arrived at the working face.

A lamp, hanging on a fitch of wood, cast a grudging light on the bench. A slim curly-haired lad was working here; he was probably fair or even red-headed, but one could not tell just then. He hewed the coal standing, his feet clinging with monkey-like agility to the props; he looked like a trapeze performer in a circus. His white vest was black with coal-dust and sweat. He worked artistically—even the boys could see that; his slim, supple, almost girlish body was swift and intelligent in its movements, and the muscles rippled under the skin.

"Footballer!" the foreman said with a good-natured chuckle, obviously lost in admiration of the boy's performance. "Hullo, Mitya! God help!"

"Thanks, Afanasi Petrovich!" Mitya answered without interrupting his work. "I can manage without God, though. But I can't manage without tubs."

"Why, aren't there any empties?"

"I've got them now, but I wasted all the morning. It's enough to make a fellow cry!"

"Tut-tut, that's too bad!" the foreman sighed sympathetically. "I've brought you guests, Mitya. Your pals—the Komsomol."

Mitya stopped working and eyed the boys with curiosity.

"How d'you do, comrades," he said like a hospitable host. "Welcome! How d'you like it here?"

"I'm leaving two with you," the foreman said. "Show 'em the ropes, will you? Who wants to stay here?"

Bratchenko offered to stay; he was completely fagged out and looked a pitiful sight. Malchenko made up the second.

"Don't start hewing until we pass, Mitya," the foreman said. "I'll give you the signal below. Well, come along."

The boys slid down again until they reached the next bench.

Andrei and Victor remained at the third bench, almost at the end of the face (counting upwards). Here worked an elderly miner with a flabby almost womanish face covered with a starveling growth of hair. He sat in a heavy, un-miner-like, clumsy pose, with his legs wide apart, hacking the coal on the roof with a pick. He took no notice of the boys at first.

Only after the foreman had gone, asking him not to hew until they had passed through, did he lay his pick aside with a yawn, then, in a slightly snuffling voice, surprisingly thin for such a burly man, he asked:

"What are you boys doing here? Eh?"

"We're Komsomol boys," Victor said eagerly. He had a thousand questions ready to ask the miner, and was burning with impatience to have a go at the coal himself.

"What made you leave home?" the miner asked lazily. "Didn't you like it there?"

"No, why?" Victor said, puzzled.

"Got a decent farm? Got a cow?"

"We're not from the village. We're town boys."

"Ah!" He looked at them dully. "What made you leave town?"

"We're Komsomol members."

"Ah!" he snuffled. "These things happen." He yawned again. Then he stretched his whole body, grunted and lay down on the broad of his back.

Victor lost all desire to ask him any questions. The boys looked at him drearily; he wore the usual miner's dungarees, but on his head was a round threadbare sheep-skin cap such as Tatars wear.

"Hey, Sviridov, all clear!" the foreman shouted up.

But Sviridov did not budge. He lay staring dully at the roof with unblinking eyes, like a shepherd in the steppe, basking in the sun and looking into the sky. Suddenly he laughed noiselessly. The boys looked at him in surprise: his flabby face quivered and shook like jelly, and at any moment, it seemed, it would start running.

"There are some funny fellows, I must say," he barely managed to get out through the fit of laughter. "Coming out here to make big money. They're a scream, they are!" He choked with laughter again.

"So that's what he was thinking of when he stared at the roof!" Andrei thought with amusement.

"There's the big money." Sviridov squealed, poking his finger in the seam. "It's big all right, but just try and lug it away. Funny chaps!" The fit of merriment passed abruptly, and he picked up his tool. "So you're Komsomol boys? Well, well!" He shook the pick at them and gave the seam a whack.

The boys watched him silently while he worked. Sviridov did not hew the coal the way Mitya did; his work lacked that boy's grace and artistry; he wheezed, kept spitting on his hands, looking at the boys out of the tail of his eye, and hacked furiously at the coal face. The coal did not come away in great chunks, as it did with Mitya, but crumbled off in driblets.

Suddenly he stopped and stood listening.

"Hist!" he whispered. "Hear it?" His face registered alarm. "D'you hear it?" he said, looking at the boys with an odd sidelong glance.

"N-no," the boys said irresolutely.

"Listen with both ears! Hear it snapping?"

They strained their ears, and caught the faintest of cracklings all round them.

"Creeps," Sviridov said, looking sideways at the boys. "God help us! It's coming, boys!"

"D'you think there's likely to be a fall?" Victor whispered.

"Shouldn't be surprised." He listened again. "That's where the trouble is!" he said, prodding the roof with his pick right over the boys' heads. Something fell away there.

"Crumbling already!" Sviridov said. "Got to save the working, boys!"

"What can we do?" Victor stammered.

"You're in the Komsomol, aren't you?" Sviridov said sternly. "Well, then!" He listened again, then said: "I'll run for the timberers, and you boys prop the roof up."

"How?"

"Like this!" Sviridov got down on all fours, his hands resting against the pit props, and supported the roof with his back. "Will you be able to do it?"

"We'll try," Andrei said uncertainly.

"Not afraid?"

"We're not afraid of anything!" Victor said boastfully. He was quite cheerful now. "You go along, don't worry about us. We'll manage here all right!" With an air of grim determination he got down on all fours and pressed his back against the roof.

"That's the stuff! Fine, you're regular heroes!" He looked at them—both were now on their hands and knees, buttressing the roof—and added: "I shan't be a minute. Regular heroes, you are! This will get into the papers, I'm sure!" And he hurriedly crawled away.

The boys were left alone. For a time they were silent. They pressed their backs harder against the cold slippery roof. Then Victor whispered:

"D'you hear it?"

"Yes," Andrei whispered back.

It seemed to them that the crackling grew louder. Now, as they listened intently with bated breath, they caught all the pit's secret whisperings and murmurs. The place was alive with sounds.

Oddly enough the boys experienced no fear. Now, when they were looking real danger in the face, they were not afraid of anything. Standing in those awkward, ungainly attitudes, they had no thought for themselves. All they thought of was—would Sviridov be in time? Would they be able to save the working?

Hazy ideas concerning the heroism of their conduct flitted through Victor's mind—"the whole mine will get to know about it . . . maybe it'll get into the papers . . . and if we're crushed, they'll bury us with music, like heroes. . . ."—but Andrei had no such thoughts. Crouching there on all fours, he felt a man at last; he was calm, unafraid, he was doing something important for the pit and he was pleased.

His back was beginning to ache, though, and his legs to grow numb.

"He's a long time coming!" Victor said. He moved his back impatiently and a lump of dried earth fell away from the roof.

"Careful, you!" Andrei hissed, and Victor froze still.

Time dragged on painfully, endlessly. Had Sviridov forgotten about them? Had he not invented that excuse just to get away and leave them to face the danger themselves?

Suddenly they heard a noise below. They strained their ears—men were crawling up. Their voices could be heard already; a lamp flashed in the darkness. . . . More lamps. . . . They drew nearer. . . .

The first to come into the working was Sviridov. He trained his lamp on the boys and yelled exultantly:

"They're holding it!"

Men crawled up from all sides.

"They're holding it!" Sviridov yelled again, and the pent-up laughter burst from his throat with a howl. "Oh, carry me upstairs, boys, I'm dying! Look at 'em, holding the roof up with their backsides!"

Shrieks of laughter greeted the statement. The very walls seemed to rock and reel from the mighty roar, threatening to bring down the roof which the boys were so carefully protecting. The boys involuntarily recoiled before the fierce, lashing wave of howling derision. They realized that they had been fooled.

The guffawing men came up closer and closer, each eager to have a good look at the heroes, who . . . ho, ho, ho!—were holding the roof up with their backsides. The boys found themselves within a circle of yellow gleaming bull's-eyes, as if they had been overtaken by a pack of wolves. They saw no faces—only mouths, gaping, laughing mouths with bared teeth. It was ghastly.

Suddenly a strong commanding voice broke through the laughter and noise:

"Now then, stop that! Stop it, I tell you!" someone shouted angrily. "You ought to be ashamed of yourselves! What are you laughing at, you fools!"

"Oh, you don't understand, Prokop Maximovich!" Sviridov squealed, still shaking with laughter. "We're just initiating the novices, it's their holy baptism."

"Oh, so this is your doing, Sviridov?" Prokop Maximovich pounced on him. "Is it long since you were a novice yourself? You kulak spawn, you. I can't make out what devils brought you here! You wait!"

"Oh, come, come, Prokop Maximovich, I didn't mean anything!" Sviridov stammered, now thoroughly frightened.

"You've been given a chance to earn a crust of bread here, so shut up! Crawl into your damned hole and stay there! Playing tricks here! You wait!" He shook his lamp

at Sviridov threateningly. "And you're a fine lot, too!" he said, turning to the rest of the men. "Only too glad of the chance! And you here, too, Logunov? Tut-tut, I thought you were a sensible man."

"Here, hold on, there's no need to go off the deep end!" came flustered voices. "It was only a joke."

"A joke!" Prokop Maximovich snapped. "You just look at them, those new boys. It's no joking matter for them!" He crawled up to the boys; they saw the fierce bewhiskered face of the miner; he lowered himself heavily on his heels beside them and turned his lamp on their faces. "Why, they're children!" he said with unexpected tenderness. "Komsomol members?"

The boys nodded.

"Never mind, boys, never mind!" he said kindly, then turned to the others. "See whom you have insulted! The Komsomol! Nice doings, eh?"

There was an embarrassed silence.

"There!" Prokop Maximovich said impressively. "And let this be the last time. If I hear anything again, look out!" His moustaches bristled. "I don't have to tell you, you know me!" he smiled and turned to the boys again. "If anyone treats you bad, come and tell me. We don't go in for visiting-cards here, so remember my name: Prokop Lesnyak. Everyone knows it here. It's a well-known name, a collier's." He laughed. "And now come with me, I'll take you down to the drift. There's nothing for you to do here. Now then, make way, folks!"

Everyone hastily made way for him and he crawled down the working with surprising agility for such a huge burly man. The boys followed him down.

He left them in the drift.

"I've got half a shift to go yet," he explained. "You sit here, it's nice and cool. I'll tell the foreman." He patted Victor on the back and added apologetically: "Don't be offended with our folks, they're not a bad lot, really."

This is all Sviridov's doing. And ignorance, if you like. It's lonesome, you know, working at the face all by yourself."

He went away, and they did not even thank him. They had not uttered a word yet since Sviridov had come back. The miners' laughter still rang in their ears.

They could not sit here, "nice and cool" though it was. Getting up of one accord they wandered aimlessly down the drift, splashing through the mud. They walked for a long time in utter silence, thinking the same thoughts.

"They'll all make fun of us now!" Victor said at length in a low bitter voice. "We'll never hear the last of it."

Andrei tried to console him.

"Oh no, they won't, Vitya! Uncle Prokop won't let 'em, you'll see." He put his arm round his friend's shoulder and whispered hotly: "It was Sviridov, he's a kulak, see? You heard it yourself. We'll show him, you wait!"

Behind them a distant rumble had been steadily growing in volume, drawing nearer and nearer, but they heard nothing, until, quite close at hand, a piercing whistle struck their ears. They spun round to see a "batch" rushing down on them. The horse could be heard snorting and the putter was shouting something to them.

They dashed hither and thither between the rails, to get out of harm's way, then started running down the haulage drift. They ran like mad.

"Quick, Vitya, quick!" Andrei egged his friend on. But the piercing whistle of the horse-putter, sharp as a lash, sounded close behind them. Suddenly it occurred to them that all they had to do was to get clear of the rails and press their bodies against the props. They did so, and the "batch" of tubs rushed past them with a clatter and roar. The shock-headed putter could not help laughing at the sight of the boys with white, terror-stricken faces frantically clutching the props.

His laughter echoed long under the vaulted roof and finally died away. Then the boys heard laughter again, this time quite close at hand; it was a small gleeful giggle of a laugh, and all the more offensive.

It came from a young girl. They looked round and saw her at once. One could not miss her—she was all aglow. She had seven or eight miner's lamps on her; they hung from her belt, dangled in her hands, and one even hung down her back.

The girl was laughing at them; she had seen them running.

"Oo, just like bunnies, scared rabbits!" she crowed with delight. The boys advanced on her grimly.

"What'yer cackling about?" Victor demanded morosely.

This sent her into more gales of laughter. The lamps on her jiggled like so many bells.

"Maybe you'd like a punch in the jaw to shut you up?" Andrei suggested, and the two friends gripped her arms.

She did not struggle to free herself, did not call for help, and did not squeal. She merely regarded the boys with curiosity, wondering whether they would really dare to hit her. She found the situation interesting.

Victor lightly pushed her away.

"Best have nothing to do with her, the fool. Don't let me catch you again!"

She laughed.

"Bunnies, bunnies, scary bunnies!" she sang, but they had already moved off. Strange to say, although they had not taken it out on the girl—and they would have dearly loved to have a smack at somebody—they felt relieved. That day would pass and be forgotten; there were days and days of life ahead of them. What did they care if people laughed? At least they had not been scared to stay alone in the working after Sviridov had gone!

They knew now that in the pit, as in life, there were difficulties and joys, good people and bad.

That same night Bratchenko ran away from the mine. The boys did not get to know about it till the morning, after they woke up. Bratchenko's bed had not been slept in, and on the pillow lay his Komsomol card. There was no letter or note—just the Komsomol card on the pillow. It was plain enough.

The boys stood round the cot in silence, as though a dead man were lying on it.

"That's number one!" Andrei thought with dismay.

Svetlichny picked up the Komsomol card and read out slowly: "Grigory Antonovich Bratchenko."

"We'll remember that!" he said in a hard tone. "Grigory Bratchenko." He flung the card on the pillow with a violent gesture. "You're a scoundrel, Grigory Bratchenko!"

"It was the air that got him down," Malchenko said apologetically. He had become friendly with Bratchenko these last few days—their cots stood together. "He kept complaining about the air. He grew up in the fresh air, in the steppe, and now he had to work in a mine."

"Where did we live, in caves?" Svetlichny interrupted him angrily. "D'you think *we* don't like fresh air? But we don't run away. No, he came by that card too easy, and dropped it just as easy. But never mind, he won't breathe fresh air anywhere now, you'll see! It'll be poisoned wherever he goes. Damned Judas!"

"We ought to let his branch know," said Gleb Vasilchikov, a boy from Kharkov.

"We ought to write about it in the papers, that's what!" Victor shouted. "Let everyone know!"

All began shouting at once:

"Report it to the newspapers and the Central Committee of the Komsomol."

"What about writing his mother—see what a rotter your son is, auntie?"

"What's his mother got to do with it?"

"It was her upbringing! Breeding rotters!"

"He got cold feet, maybe he'll come back yet," someone hazarded.

"Like fun he will!" Victor laughed. "That kind doesn't come back!"

Svetlichny was silent. He was listening with half an ear to "the voice of the masses"—it was a good voice, a sincere one!—the while he pursued his own train of thought. He could not make Bratchenko out—a Komso-mol membership card was not a thing to be flung about. He could not understand people running away from the mine, deserting their post. There was no sense in it. You couldn't run away from yourself, from your own conscience, could you?

It occurred to him that he himself might have been in Kharkov now, instead of where he was. Things were lively in Kharkov. He had gone away just on the eve of the plenum. There had been talk about appointing him Assistant Secretary of the Town Committee. Many people had been surprised to learn that he had volunteered to go out to the mines.

But no one had detained him, no one dared, for it was a mobilization call. A sacred cause!

Had that been a mere impulse on the spur of the moment? The meeting had indeed been an exciting one, and he had yielded to the mood. Now, standing by Bratchenko's cot, he was searching his own heart.

He recalled all the Kharkov committee boys. Some had come to the committee from the factories, others straight from school; these he used to call "schoolers." It was amazing how quickly the "schoolers" matured into solid, dignified men. He tried to imagine them here, in the hostel, at the mine, and laughed. He had done right. One could

not keep urging others to go out. One had to taste life oneself first, and then. . . . What would happen then, he did not know himself. Besides, it was too early in the day to be thinking about that.

He became aware that the "masses" had quieted down and were looking at him, waiting for him to decide. They had chosen him as their leader without a meeting, and he resented it. What did he need that burden for? He had come out to work in the mine, not to sit on committees. No, thanks! They had their own committee men here.

In his heart of hearts, however, he knew that he would shove his oar in, have a say in everything. He could not help it. It was in his blood. Dash it all, he had not come out here to hide himself! He had come to fight. This hitch business would stand looking into. So would the fact that people were running away from the mine.

He said:

"We can of course report it to both the Central Committee and the newspapers!" He paused, ran his prickly eye over the boys, and added: "Let that be a lesson to us all! Who'll be the next one?" He looked straight at Andrei—he had noticed the boy's silence for some time. "You, Voronko?"

"I won't run away," Andrei said sullenly.

"I'm not so sure," Svetlichny said, but a smile took the edge off his words. "Look here, boys," he said earnestly, "it's time we became friends."

Struzhnikov, the Secretary of the colliery Komsomol Committee, came in, looking excited. He had already heard of the event.

"What a shame! How could you boys let such a thing happen?" he cried straight from the door-way.

"We're not mind readers!" Malchenko muttered guiltily.

"Then there isn't real Komsomol friendship among you!" the Secretary said. "You don't know each other."

"We haven't even got a real organization, if it comes to that," Svetlichny said.

"That's a fact!" Victor shouted. "We live sort of non-party."

"There's an organization at the mine," the Secretary said in a hurt tone. "Why do you keep aloof? You should mix with our folks. We count on you a lot"—looking at Svetlichny.

"What we want is work!" Victor shouted. "We've done enough sightseeing! It's enough to make a fellow sick!"

"That's true," Svetlichny confirmed. "Too much dawdling about."

"Today they'll split you up into professions," Struzhnikov promised, "and tomorrow you'll start working in the mine!"

"I want to be a hewer!" Victor cried hastily. "I won't take any other job."

They clamoured round the Secretary, and Bratchenko was forgotten. His Komsomol card was left lying on the pillow.

Struzhnikov remembered it as he was going away, and took it with him.

Victor wanted to be a coal-hewer because he had heard it was the most looked-up-to profession at the colliery. His request was granted, for he was a strong sturdy lad. Andrei, not to be outdone by his pal, asked for a hewer's job too. They were promised that they would be taken down into the pit the next day and attached to master workers as learners.

"Learn to handle the pick, and then you'll be given a plan quota for yourselves."

"Will it take long to learn?" Andrei asked.

"It is a longish job, but we can't afford to wait long these days," he was told. "Hitch! We're short of hewers. No, we can't have you learning long."

"We shan't be long ourselves!" laughed Victor.

The next morning they were told off for work. Victor was placed with Mitya Zakorko, the curly-haired lad whom they had already met in the pit on their first visit. In the light of day he proved really to be red-headed.

"Here's a learner for you, Mitya," the section overman said, introducing Victor. He grinned. "Another artist, by the looks of him. You two should make a go of it." The overman considered himself something of a psychologist.

Andrei was placed in the charge of an elderly taciturn coal-hewer named Antipov.

"And here's a pupil for you, Antipov," the overman said.

"Ah, right-o. I don't mind," Antipov mumbled indifferently.

"Teach him all the tricks—how to handle the pick, how to set the bit, how to cut the coal. . . ."

"Certainly . . . why not . . . yes. . . . Well, well!" Antipov said and walked out of the stint room, followed by Andrei.

They came to the working face without a word having passed between them.

Antipov started making preparations at the working face with habitual care and orderliness: he hung his lamp up, laid the little bag with the bits in a convenient place, and checked the timber for the propping.

Then he sat down, looked at his apprentice and scratched his head. Here he was at a complete loss.

"Ahem . . . er . . ." he said irresolutely, "that's the coal . . . this is the pick . . . you know. . . ."

"I understand," Andrei whispered.

"Yes. . . . Of course . . . nothing tricky. . . . Well, well! That's about all. Eh?" He looked at the boy interrogatively.

"I don't know," Andrei said in confusion.

"Yes . . . that's how it is . . . got to get busy . . . tut, that's too bad!"

"You go on with your work! I'll watch you."

"That's right!" Antipov cheered up visibly. "You watch! I'm none too handy . . . you know . . . with the tongue. Say it better with the pick."

He started hewing the coal while Andrei watched him.

At lunch-time he met Victor. Victor was displeased.

"What's the idea, giving me a kid for a teacher!" he waxed indignant. "Swanking about, showing off. I'm just wasting my time."

It appeared that they had fallen out with each other at the very start. They both had the fighting-cock temperament. The "Artist" had started to boast about himself, and Victor had snubbed him sharply.

"We quarrelled all through the shift!" Victor wound up gloomily. "How's yours?"

"So-so!" Andrei sighed, then remembering how Antipov worked, he added: "We get on quite well, though!"

Indeed, he soon got to love his teacher. Antipov turned out to be a kind fellow, although uncommunicative. He could not explain things to Andrei, but he worked well, diligently.

Andrei learned a good deal just by watching him, first and foremost, to keep the place in order.

"It's a house . . . my house. . . . I live here. . . ." Antipov explained in his inarticulate way. "And up there"—pointing to the surface—"is my cottage . . . I sleep there. . . . That's all!"

Also he revealed to Andrei his cherished secret—how to sharpen the bit. He grew quite animated over it. Obviously, he knew that job well and loved it.

Andrei, watching him, learned to set props, and now often did the timbering himself in Antipov's wake. The coal-hewer checked his propping once or twice and seemed to be satisfied, for he did not check it any more.

But as to how to cut the coal—that he could not explain to Andrei.

“Here’s the way to hew it . . . see . . . like this . . . come on. . . .”

But the coal eluded Andrei. He hewed away with might and main, whacking the coal face with a “huszza!” like a man splitting wood, but it was no use; the coal crumbled and came away reluctantly.

Andrei carefully watched his teacher, anxious to find out what the master’s secret was. But he was unable to catch it. Antipov hewed the coal leisurely without seeming to exert himself, and it flowed from under his pick in a thin steady stream, or else came away in great chunks that fell with a crash.

One day it seemed to Andrei that he had mastered the trick at last. He was agog with excitement—the coal had started to flow! He hacked away with utter self-oblivion, worked himself into a lather, when suddenly right over his ear, came a sharp, jerky command:

“Drop it!”

He turned round. Before him stood Prokop Maximovich.

“Drop it!” he said disgustedly. “Blunting the pick for nothing!” Andrei lowered his tool, bewildered.

“And now, look here!” Prokop Maximovich commanded, holding his lamp up to the coal face (the “breast” of the seam, as miners would say). “Well? What do you see?”

“Coal. . .” Andrei muttered hesitatingly.

“Coal!” the miner said mockingly. “But what’s in the coal? Take a good look.”

Andrei looked hard and saw thin veins and rifts in the seam, an intricate pattern of wrinkles, like the brow of a wise old man who has lived a well-spent life.

“Well? What do you see?”

“I see veins . . . cracks. . .”

“Now, look how those cracks run. Well?”

Andrei saw that the cracks all ran in one direction;

they seemed to flow together, forming a tiny stream, barely visible to the eye.

"That's the stream," Prokop Maximovich explained. "Scientists call it the cleavage. That's what you've got to peck at, the cleavage. Whacking blindly at the coal won't get you anywhere. Got to handle the pick with brains, then the coal will start coming away itself. Why didn't you explain this to him?" he said to Antipov in a tone of rebuke.

"Well, yes . . . of course. . . . Didn't I, though? Oh, I'm no professor!" Antipov said with a hopeless gesture.

"On this job you and I are professors, there aren't any others," the miner said proudly, and turned to Andrei: "Carry on that way, son! I'll look you up again."

"Well, yes. . ." Antipov mumbled in confusion when Prokop Maximovich had gone, "he's a brainy chap . . . Party man . . . not like us. . . . H'm, professor! That's a bit thick. . . ."

Andrei now tried hacking the coal at the cleavage line. At first it did not work—the stream slipped away, eluded him. He chased it as if it were a lizard, and tried to pin its tail down with the pick; it wriggled and played tricks with him. Then little by little he learned to follow its track without losing it, and the cutting grew easier. He was delighted. If only Victor could see how he was bringing the coal down!

Victor was somewhere there in the working, two benches higher up, but they only met after work.

Victor was having a bad time. He had asked for and was given another teacher—a serious, experienced miner. But he did not get on with him either. He listened to the man's explanations with impatience and annoyance, but when he started handling the pick himself nothing came of it.

"Try hitting the cleavage line!" Andrei advised him. "You'll find it much easier."

The trouble, however, was not in the cleavage, but in Victor himself. He could not help it. He was good at doing only what he liked to do, and he liked to do only what came easy.

It had been the same at school, the same in childhood. He had learned to swim as if the river were his native element, and he swam excellently, far better than any of the other boys. He spent days on the river, organized swimming competitions, beat everyone at them, and was happy and proud. But he did not make a success of skiing. His first attempt was a public fiasco, and he dropped it at once like a hot potato.

He was accustomed to be "topnotcher" in everything and he liked it. With him it was either top or nothing.

Had he taken the coal in his stride at the very outset and had the name of Victor the coal-hewer become the talk of the colliery as the best boy among the novices, Victor would have loved the mine and the hewer's profession. There would not have been a more eager and zealous man at the colliery. He would have worked wonders.

But he did not take the coal in his stride, and the mine became hateful to him. He went to the pit now as if he were going to the rack. Again his teacher would find fault, again the overman would taunt him and Svetlichny scowl at him. Svetlichny was the newly elected Komsomol organizer of the pit section, and he was said to be doing well at the working face too.

Victor should have asked for an immediate transfer to a horse-putter's job. He had the horse-putter's dashing temperament. There would not have been a greater daredevil of a putter in the colliery. But he did not think of it himself and no one suggested it to him. Indeed, he would have felt awkward about it, seeing that he had asked for a hewer's job himself.

And so he plodded along drearily at the working face.

He lost his grip on things and became dejected. In the evenings he lolled on his bed, brooding in silence. There was not a trace of the former gay spark. He looked miserable and resentful.

"We have no luck, Andrei!" he complained bitterly to his friend. "We've come to the wrong shop. Should have gone out to a construction job, somewhere in the Magnitnaya steppe! That's where we'd have found our feet!"

"It's difficult everywhere at first," Andrei tried to remonstrate.

"As if I'm afraid of difficulties! You ought to know me by now. I don't shy at hard work. Out there it's real work, but here!" He waved his hand contemptuously. He had quite forgotten that only ten days ago he had spoken differently. He forgot things quickly.

"My father says every kind of work is good work."

"He's never been down a mine, your father!" Victor retorted. "And we have. We've been up against it. Only today my chap was teaching me how to 'kennel' myself. Kennel!" His lips twisted wryly. "The word itself is disgusting! As if we're dogs. . . . We'll be stuck in this hole all our life now, kennelled up. . . ."

Andrei did not know how to help his friend. Things were going hard with him too, but at least he saw a gleam of hope ahead. The cleavage was the thing! He thought of Prokop Maximovich with gratitude.

"Why not consult Prokop Maximovich?" he suggested uncertainly.

"What's the use!" Victor said with a shrug. "I'm not a patient, and he's not a doctor."

"He's a professor! There isn't a thing he doesn't know. Besides, he's a Party man. Let's go and see him. Call at his house."

Victor smiled wryly. "Have you been invited, or what?"

"I have. He invited us himself."

"When was that?"

"Today. He invited us once before."

Victor eyed his friend doubtfully. Was he fibbing? The invitation was flattering, though. He wasn't such a non-entity at the mine, if a collier like Prokop Maximovich Lesnyak invited him down to his house.

His answer, however, was offhand and careless:

"Oh, all right. We can pop in on our day off."

* 9 *

On Sunday they had a good clean-up and smartened themselves. Each got out of his box the best things he had: Victor, a navy-blue suit, practically new, a shirt with cross-stitch embroidery down the front and a cap with a big black lacquered peak such as sea skippers wear; Andrei, a Russian blouse embroidered with blue cornflowers, a cord sash with tassels, a brand new jacket—a parting present from his father—and good soft leather top-boots worn over the trouser legs.

The private cupboards had not made their appearance in the hostel yet, but there was a mirror. They both resembled bridegrooms, and the dark patches under their eyes where the coal-dust had already eaten into the skin looked like make-up.

They had no difficulty in finding Prokop Maximovich's house—everyone in the settlement knew the collier.

It was a neat little house and all white—even the tiled roof was white. No one is so fond of white as a collier, nor so fond of greenery. Andrei sighed involuntarily at the sight of thin threads running up to the roof of the veranda; the climbing morning-glory had already faded. But the asters by the porch were still in blossom, and clusters of shrivelled yellow leaves still dangled from the acacias—waiting for the first autumn wind.

There was an air of sweet melancholy about this little garden, already touched by the breath of autumn. Every-

thing lay wrapped in that deep stillness peculiar to a Sunday noon; the shutters on the windows were half-open. Looking at them, one could easily imagine that inside the little house it was cool, shady and clean, with a smell of apples, vanilla, and Sunday pies, and the people who lived there were good, simple people, leading peaceful, hard-working, happy lives.

The boys lingered for a while at the wicket. It stood invitingly open, but they hesitated to go in. They were afraid it would be bad manners to walk straight in. Being invited guests and not just casual callers, they felt they ought to knock, or ring the bell. But there was no door to knock on, and no bell to ring.

They stood about awkwardly in their new clothes, not knowing what to do. Suddenly they saw a girl in a print frock running towards the house from the cellar with a jug in her hand.

"Excuse me!" Victor said politely.

The girl came up to the garden fence, and the boys were almost horrified to recognize in her that imp of a girl who had poked such cruel fun at them in the pit when they had run away from the horse-putter.

They had met her once or twice in the pit since then, but had turned away hastily, while she, recognizing them, had laughed behind their backs. They did not know who she was, where she lived and what her name was. All they knew was that she worked as lamp girl and the miners called her Fire-Fly, because she appeared in the working like a ray of light to give the miner a new lamp in place of the old one, which had gone out.

Just now she was white and dainty, and pretty, too, in her pale-pink cotton frock. But they recognized her at once.

She recognized them too.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded suspiciously, looking at them over the fence.

"And what are *you* doing here?" Victor said, nettled.

"Me? I like that!" she laughed. "I live here. What do you want?"

"We don't want you," Andrei said hastily. "We've come as guests."

"Aren't you the one who wanted to give me a licking down in the pit?" she turned upon him fiercely, and suddenly, like a true pit boy, yelled: "Hit me! Come on, hit me!"

"We haven't come to fight, we've come as guests. . . ." Andrei stammered.

"You'd better clear out, you guests! Come on, shoo off!" she shouted. "Take that for a start!" She splashed some kvass over them out of the jug, laughing as she did so. Victor leapt back just in time to save his best suit.

"Hi, careful what you're doing, you fool!" he shouted angrily.

"Get a move on! Come on, make it snappy!" She put two fingers into her mouth, the horse-putter way, and emitted an ear-splitting whistle.

"We're staying where we are!" Andrei said, his anger suddenly rising. It was not easy to make him lose his temper, but this girl had succeeded in doing it. No power on earth could make him budge now. He was obstinate. Anyone who knew him would have recognized the danger signals—the darkened eyes, the contracted brows and the head thrust forward bull fashion.

But the girl did not know this.

"I'll set the dogs on you!" she said, and called out: "Hi, Polkan, Trezor!"

At this point the host himself appeared. Prokop Maximovich came out on to the porch and shouted:

"Hey! What's all this noise about? A lot of dust and no fight!"

"There will be a fight in a minute!" the girl said.

"Good day, Prokop Maximovich!" Andrei said, doffing his cap.

"Ah, it's you! Come in, come in!" The collier welcomed them with outstretched arms. "What do you mean, upsetting my guests?" he rebuked his daughter in passing.

"They're pests, not guests," she snapped back at him.

"Shut up, you cheeky devil! How d'you do, boys!" The collier shook hands with them cordially. "Come in!"

He led the way inside.

"That girl of yours is a holy terror!" Andrei muttered, still scowling at her. "You ought to keep her on a chain. She's likely to bite someone."

"I'll soon chain her up—marry her off," the host said with a laugh, ushering the guests into the house.

They were surprised to find a big company there. Dinner was just being served. The boys stopped in the doorway, feeling acutely embarrassed.

"Come right in!" the host laughed. "Don't be shy! No strangers here. My family and relatives, all colliers. And these," he said, introducing Andrei and Victor, "are Kom-somol boys. They've come to help us. I hope you'll like them. Do you hail from Kursk?" he asked the boys. Everyone here for some reason thought they were natives of Kursk.

"No. We're Poltavians."

"Splendid!" the host said genially. "Please sit down. Mother will join us in a minute, and we'll have a bite."

The boys sat down. They felt ill at ease in that crowded room. Their caps gave them trouble, too. They did not know what to do with them, and sat nursing them on their knees.

Apart from the host and his daughter they knew no one here. All were elderly people, except for a lad of their own age with a funny freckled nose and hair combed back from the forehead, who sat a little aloof, strumming a guitar.

A youngish-looking woman, slim as a girl, came in with a light swift step, carrying a steaming stew-pan.

"And here's the missus!" Prokop Maximovich announced. "Nastasya Makarovna. People's commissar of the kitchen."

Nastasya Makarovna smiled—she had the same quick mocking eyes as her daughter—and putting down the saucepan, went up to the boys.

"How do you do, I'm glad to see you!" she said in a melodious voice. "Let me have your caps."

They surrendered their caps to her in confusion, and she carried them off. She moved with a light agile gait, in quick little jerks, as it were, not after the waddling fashion of most elderly women. "Must have been a haul-age girl!" Andrei thought. He had noticed that there were no fat women at the colliery. All the women had young, slender figures, and old faces, older than their age. Why that was so he could not say, but he accounted for this, as for everything else he saw here, by the single word: colliery.

"Well!" said the host. "The borshch is on the table, time we set to!"

"Aye, that we can!" laughed a weazened little old man with a bland whimsical face and brushy hair. "We can walk into a meal as easy as walking inbye."

All went to the table, and took their seats amid laughter and a clatter of chairs.

"Sit here!" the host motioned the boys to a place next to himself.

"Where's Ma?" said a man with a loud voice. He was a collier of about forty-five with a blue-pitted face, quite as tall as the host, but unlike him, rather dour and taciturn.

"Mamma will be here soon," Nastasya Makarovna said quickly. "Ah, here she is!"

A very tall, upright old woman with a white head, came noiselessly into the room. Everyone stood up in silence. She made a low bow to the guests.

"I wish you a good appetite!" she said in a husky pleasant voice and went to her seat.

She walked erect, without the aid of a stick, and with a light buoyant step remarkable in a person of her age—she was seventy-five. She was quite unlike those feeble, fussy little old women Andrei was accustomed to at home, in Chibiryaki.

There was something proud and independent about that sturdy old lady, about her straight unbendable back, her strong, open, almost masculine face, and her wise undimmed eyes.

Such people are fond of saying of themselves: "I never ate strangers' bread, always made my own living." The hard school of life had straightened her back, rather than bent it, taught her to face adversity bravely, to fear nothing and nobody, to be dependent on no one and rely only upon her own hands.

Looking at her, one could readily understand and account for all who sat there—why they were what they were, and why peace, friendship and joy reigned in that little house under the white roof.

"This is our Mother!" Prokop Maximovich said respectfully, with a tinge of emotion. "Mine and Ivan's, but a foster-mother to all the colliery. You ask anyone," he added with a note of pride, "he'll tell you that Yevdokia Petrovna is the miners' mother."

"I have lots of these . . . scamps . . ." the old woman smiled, slightly put out.

"A famous old lady!" the jolly little old man with the brushy hair whispered to the boys. "She can tell you about 1905,* she can—took part in it herself!"

* An allusion to the first Russian revolution of 1905.—*Tr.*

"Mother is on a visit here!" Prokop Maximovich said. "She's making a round of the collieries, reviewing all her children."

"So I am!" laughed the old lady. "This is my last inspection trip. When I've finished my round, I'll die."

"Come, come, Yevdokia Petrovna!" the jolly old man protested. "You'll live for many years yet!"

"No. I'm going to die. My work's done—my time is up!"

"What's the matter—are you ailing?"

"I haven't been took that way yet. It's just that my time is up."

"We simply forbid you even to think of it, Mother!" said Prokop Maximovich. "You mustn't die, you'll leave too many orphans. Here are two more grandsons"—pointing to Andrei and Victor—"for you to mother."

"Ah, I'm very glad, young men!" the old lady nodded amiably. "What's your names?"

"Mine is Andrei."

"I'm Victor."

"How terribly young!" she smiled. "Local boys?"

"No, they're from Poltava," Prokop Maximovich said.

"Ah!" She nodded her white head. "I daresay you find it lonesome here in a strange place? It must be hard without a mother?"

"Oh, no!" Victor said stoutly. "We're not babies."

"Come and see us more often, you're welcome. Prokop here is fond of guests. He's a chatty one!" Everybody laughed. She threw her son a startled look. "What, have I said something again?"

"No, Mother, no!" the latter said, laughing. "I am a chatty one, I like a good talk. Why not, when there's something to talk about?"

"He's a caution!" the jolly old man inserted slyly. "He can not only talk you into a fever, he can put on a show

for you!" he said to the boys. "A master hand at everything."

"But nobody's drinking, I see!" the host cried. "Help yourselves, please, don't wait to be served! I don't know what the world is coming to, Mother. D'you remember how folks used to drink?" he said, pouring the vodka out of a decanter.

"Is that the best your memory can do?" his mother said. "I don't think much of it."

"They knew how to drink, though. Real jolly good fellowship . . . sold their last pair of trousers to buy a drink, that's a fact!" He smiled. "D'you remember our mud-hut, Mamma? A man couldn't help drinking! Do you boys drink?"

"We haven't tried yet," Andrei confessed, then blushed furiously as though he had admitted something shameful. Fire-Fly tittered.

"I do!" Victor said stoutly, and held out his glass. Prokop Maximovich eyed him with a twinkle of amusement, but said nothing and poured him out a full glass.

"Ah, well, since you insist, I'll have one too," said Prokhor, a broad-shouldered man with reddish hair and a curly-tipped swaggering moustache, who sat on Andrei's right hand.

Everybody laughed.

"What I can't make out," he said, examining his glass against the light, "is how the rumour got about that all miners are drunkards. I know any amount of men in other professions who drink harder."

"I'd like to see the man who drinks harder than you," came his wife's tight-lipped comment.

"I'm not giving wives the floor today!" the host cried jovially. "Eat and drink what the people's commissar has prepared, dear guests. There won't be anything more. Help yourselves to what's on the table!"

Andrei felt happy in this house, and his heart warmed

towards all these kind people. "How nice and simple and jolly they all are!" he thought delightedly. "And not above keeping company with us boys. Treat us like grown-ups. That's because we're miners, too, now, coal-hewers," it occurred to him. "It works out that we're mates, then." The fact that he and Prokop Maximovich were mates, working in the same pit, filled him with pride.

Victor, too, thawed in this warm atmosphere, became himself again. After his second glass of vodka he felt quite at ease; he was eager to join the conversation, to put in a word of his own, something nice and clever. But Fire-Fly, sitting opposite him, was rather disconcerting; she kept peeping at him, and laughing softly, especially when he started coughing after his vodka.

"What about you, young men," the jolly little old fellow suddenly turned to him with a sly twinkle, "I've been wanting to ask you all the time, if I may make so bold. How did you come here to our colliery? Was it your own choice?"

"We were mobilized," Victor said.

"Ah!" the old man chortled. "So you yourselves didn't think of becoming miners?"

"As a matter of fact, we didn't!" Victor said, laughing in turn. "We had other ambitions!" he added significantly, with a look at the host's daughter.

"Wanted to be airmen, I daresay?" Nastasya Makarovna said mockingly. "It's become a craze with young men these days, they all want to be flyers. Our boy's got it too." She nodded towards her son. The latter blushed in confusion.

"No!" Victor said airily; he was feeling quite at home by now. "Andrei here wanted to be a forester. He's fond of quiet, the woods. . . ." This was a dig at his pal.

"And Victor wanted to be an actor!" Andrei gave tit for tat.

Everyone laughed, Fire-Fly loudest of all.

"Well, I don't deny it," Victor said with dignity. "As a matter of fact I wanted to become a film actor," he said, toying carelessly with his empty glass. "I feel I have it in me. Yes," he sighed, "we had high ambitions, but we've landed in a mine! Kennelled ourselves up!" He finished with a scornful laugh.

"What?!" Prokop Maximovich said in a low sibilant voice, which sounded like a whistle. His face broke out in brown blotches. He rose slowly, amid a hush of sensation, and suddenly smashed his fist down on the table, setting everything tinkling.

"Get out!" he roared, beside himself. "Get out of my house, you son of a bitch!"

"Prokop, what are you doing? Come to your senses!" his wife cried, tugging at his sleeve, but there was no stopping him now.

"Get out!" he shouted again. And Victor meekly got up from his chair. He did not understand what he had done to rouse the host's ire, but he could have sunk into the ground with shame, he was ready to flee, only to get away . . . anywhere. "So you had high ambitions and we live low?" Prokop Maximovich shouted. "We're low people, mucking about with coal?"

"Sit down, Prokop!" his mother commanded imperiously, and he complied, still simmering with anger. "What are you shouting at the child for?" she went on calmly. "You have to teach him."

"I . . . I didn't mean anything. . . ." Victor stammered, almost in tears.

"It's not me you've insulted!" Prokop Maximovich said, calming down. "This is whom you've insulted, our colliers' mother. Who are you? What are you?"

"I . . . I'm nothing yet. . . ." the unfortunate Victor stuttered.

"That's just it!" the miner said sternly. "You haven't handled a tool yet, you don't know any trade. Haven't

earned your own living yet, I daresay. Who's your father?"

"He hasn't got a father," Andrei said, coming to his friend's rescue. "The Whites killed him, hacked him to pieces. He was a Bolshevik."

"Ah?" Prokop Maximovich murmured, surprised, as if he could not credit Victor with such a father. "And who was your grandfather?"

"I don't remember him," Victor muttered, thinking with anguish: "Oh, if I could only get away quick!"

"There! You don't know your kith and kin!" the miner said with a satisfied smile. "Aristocrat! But we know them well, low people though we are. Dasha!" he shouted to his daughter across the table.

"This is when he'll put up a show for you!" Makar Vasilievich, the jolly old man, chortled and rubbed his little hands in gleeful anticipation.

"Dasha!"

"Yes, Dad," Fire-Fly answered.

So her name was Dasha, Andrei thought.

"Who's your father, Dasha?" Prokop Maximovich asked sternly, as though it were an examination.

"My father is a coal-hewer by birth," Dasha rattled off like a book.

"Good. And who are your uncles?"

"My uncles are pure-blooded miners too."

"And who was your grandfather?"

"My grandfather was a miner too. He lost his life in a pit explosion."

"God rest his soul!" sighed Prokhor's wife. "He was a good man."

Yevdokia Petrovna sat as though carved out of stone. She had sat like that, it was said, when she received the news of her husband's death—without shedding a tear.

"Well, and who was your great-grandfather?" Prokop Maximovich cried. "That's to say, my grandfather?"

"Great-grandfather was a miner too."

"Correct!" shouted the host. "It was wild steppe here when he came out, wolves had the run of the place. . . . He was a man mountain, he was, strangled the wolves with his bare hands. . . . And your great-great-grandfather, Dasha, descends from the peasants of the Orel gubernia, Mtsensk uyezd. . . . But that family tree I don't count. They were peasantry—that's a different story! There"—with a triumphant look at Victor—"see what stock we come from? We may not be aristocrats, but we remember our roots! *We* sank these shafts here, *we* gave life to this steppe—our family! Yes, sir!"

"Our family, too, have been here for more than a day!" growled Makar Vasilievich, stung to the quick. "You can't get away from the fact that it was my grandfather who drove the Thirty Level together with yours."

"I'm not saying he didn't, Dad!" the host concurred. "They were in the same artel. It was through the cook-maid you and I got related!"

"If there was justice in this world," said Prokhor, twiddling his moustaches, "the shafts would be named after the miners who sunk 'em, and not be called Marias and Albertinas after the boss's daughters. After your grandfather, say, Prokop Maximovich. . . ."

"So they will! They will!" the latter cried with conviction. "The government will issue a decree and have them renamed! Although we *are* low people," he said, turning to Victor, who squirmed in his chair, "but big people bend their ear to us. Why, here's an example! Wife! Who was it visited us not so long ago? And sat in the very place I'm sitting now?"

"Oh, stop bragging!" Nastasya Makarovna waved him off with a laugh.

"No, come on, tell us!"

"Vyacheslav Mikhailovich Molotov," the host's son blurted out like a fog-horn, then looked sheepish.

"Yes. Vyacheslav Mikhailovich himself," the host confirmed with quiet pride. "He didn't consider it beneath him to visit us. Came to the mine all the way from Moscow, from the Kremlin, that high up. He sat here"—pointing to his own seat—"and chatted with us."

"Yes, big people often come to see us, we can't complain," said Prokhor.

Makar Vasilievich suddenly started chuckling joyfully.

"Whatsermatter?" Prokhor looked at him.

"Let him . . . Prokop, I mean. . ." he managed to get out through the fit of laughter, "let him tell how he took a rise out of a big man."

"I don't seem to remember," the host said, taken aback.

"Don't you? The whole colliery remembers it. One day a big man came down to the Steep Maria," Makar Vasilievich said, addressing the boys, "and straightaway he went down into the pit."

"Ah, you mean that time!" Prokop Maximovich said, shaking his head with a smile.

"Yes. And he went straight to Prokop's working. You know how it is in the pit, you can't tell a man, especially when he's in pit clothes, but the word went round quick to all the working faces. You could tell at once he wasn't a local man anyhow—some big pot. You knew that, now didn't you?" he asked the host.

"What if I did!" the latter laughed.

"There! Well, anyway, he sat there in the working, chatting about one thing and another. Asking how production was going, why there was so little mechanization. Well, they chatted for about an hour and a half, and when the man was going away, out comes Prokop and says: 'Well, comrade,' he says, 'we've had a good long talk, but I haven't been cutting any coal. What am I to do about my quota now? I never came short of it in all my born days.' 'Oh,' the big man says, laughing, 'I'll tell them to make allowance for it.' 'And who,' says Prokop, 'will you

be?' 'I,' he says, 'will be the people's commissar.' And he gives his name. 'Ah!' Prokop says, cool as you like, 'very glad! And I'll be coal-hewer Prokop Maximovich Lesnyak. Pleased to meet you!' and shoves his fist out. So they shook hands, quite like old pals." Everyone laughed.

"Why not!" Prokop Maximovich took up the story. "He has his job, I have mine. He's a big man, but I'm not a little one either! I'm producing coal!"

"There, you see!" Makar Vasilievich threw his hands up and laughed. "That's what he told Molotov, too, slap-bang—we're old pals, he says!"

"Oh, no!" the host warmly protested. "That's piling it on, Dad! I couldn't say a thing like that. What do you take me for? But I did tell Vyacheslav Mikhailovich that we were old acquaintances, that I did. I don't deny it. We were, weren't we, Ivan?" he appealed to his taciturn brother.

"Yes," the latter briefly confirmed.

"It was back in 1920, I believe, wasn't it?"

"Yes. In the autumn."

"That's right. It was like this, you see," he suddenly addressed Victor in amicable tones. "Ivan and I had just come back from the front. Yes. . . . The pit was flooded, and nobody would allow it to be pumped clear. There wasn't any money, we were told, and that was flat! We went here and there, to the Economic Council and the See-Pee-Kay-Pee*—we called it Sleepy Baby for short," he grinned, "but they just drove us from pillar to post. So then my brother and I got a brain wave. We decided to go up to the gubernia committee of the Party. Is that right, Ivan?"

"Quite right."

"So we turn up at the Party committee. Ask for the secretary. And out he comes—who would you think?

* CPKP—Coal-Mining Administration.—*Tr.*

Well?" He beamed on the boys. "Well, who was secretary of the gubernia committee at the time? Eh? Don't you know?"

"We don't..." Andrei said, abashed.

"There. You don't know the history of the Bolshevik Party, my dear chaps, although you are Komsomol boys. Tut, tut!" He shook his head. "Well, anyway, he comes out to us—a man of medium height, sturdily built. Vyacheslav Mikhailovich Molotov. Is that right, Ivan?"

"Quite right."

"Well, I reminded Molotov of that meeting when he came to visit us here," Prokop Maximovich laughed. "I says: 'We pumped the pit clear that time, Vyacheslav Mikhailovich, thanks to your help!' And he says: 'Good for you,' he says. 'And now you'll have to pump young blood into it.' 'What?' I says, 'I've never heard of that being tried on old ladies. How's it done? You needn't worry,' I says, 'she's still going strong, yielding coal.' 'But that coal isn't enough,' he says. 'We want her to give twice as much. Will she do it?' 'I'm afraid not,' I says. 'But she's got to!' he says. 'We'll be needing a lot of coal now, we've started big construction jobs.' He set me a real puzzle, I can tell you."

"And he gave the answer to it, too!" Prokhor said impressively.

"Yes. He did. 'What,' he asks, 'do you cut the coal with? The pick?' 'Why yes, what else?' 'Your equipment is out-of-date,' he says. 'The coal should be cut with a machine or an air hammer. It's time the Donbas scrapped the pick,' he says. 'The mines should be reconstructed and new ones built.' Yes . . . he opened up big prospects to us then!"

"Afanasi Petrovich says machines are no good in the pit," Andrei put in irresolutely.

"Who?" Prokop Maximovich said, knitting his brows. "Ah! Your overman. But he's a baptist! Of course, he's a

baptist!" he burst out laughing. "Goes to prayer meetings. He came to me in 1917, when we were making the revolution down in No. 30, tried to give me advice. 'Don't commit acts of violence, Prokop!' he says. 'Have the fear of God!' And I says to him: 'I don't even fear the *pristav*,* let alone God. I had that gentleman arrested yesterday!'" Everyone laughed heartily. "No, my boys, don't you listen to him on that score. He's a conservative, his eyes are in the wrong place—they look backward."

"Mechanization should start with haulage!" Fire-Fly suddenly put in.

Everyone looked at her, but she did not turn a hair. Apparently she was used to being the general pet and favourite of the family.

"Who's that offering an opinion?" the host said ironically. "I heard a voice, but I can't see the speaker over the table."

"It's me, Daddy," Dasha said boldly. "I was speaking about haulage—"

"Oh, you were, were you? You've long been asking for trouble," her father said, trying to conceal a smile under his moustache. "Who gave you permission to go down the pit again?"

"No one."

"You wait, you minx. I'll have something to say to you when the guests have gone! How d'you like that specimen?" he said, spreading his hands. "People will say old Prokop can't afford to give his daughter an education, and has gone and driven her into the mine. You'd think someone really was driving her there! Mind I don't catch you in the pit again! D'you hear?" His voice rose to a stern note.

* Police chief of small administrative area in tsarist Russia.—*Tr.*

"But I've finished the seven-grade school. I've got to do something. You don't expect me to go and work in the office, do you?" she said with a scornful toss of her curls. "Catch me!"

"Go to technical school! Go to the courses! Continue your education while I'm still alive. This one too," he said with an angry jerk of his head towards his son. "Footballer! Can't get him to study for love or money. What's come over young people these days!" he cried. "Why, if anyone would have told me at their age—go and study, Prokop—my God, I'd—"

"I've been asking you all the time to let me go to a flying school, Dad!" his son said reproachfully. "I'm telling you again in front of everyone!" His voice shook.

"Flying school!" his father cried irritably. "Plenty of flyers in the Donbas without you—flying from mine to mine, like a swarm of locusts. But we don't see any engineers! Engineers is what we want!" he said warmly. "We won't go far with Kazimir Savelievich!"

"You said it!" laughed Makar Vasilievich.

"Yes, Kazimir Savelievich is a dark horse!" said Prokhor. "Sometimes I wonder if he isn't one of those sabotaging chaps who were recently put on trial. Lying low? Eh?"

"There!" Prokop Maximovich said to his son reproachfully. "Hear that? Where are new engineers to come from if our children are giddy-headed and don't want to study?"

"Kazimir Savelievich is an engineer of the old leaven!" Makar Vasilievich chuckled. "He doesn't like to put himself to trouble."

"As it is he complains about having to visit the colliery so often," Prokhor said. "In the old days, he says, the chief engineer used to visit the mine once a month, if not once in three months, and the work was none the worse for it, he says."

"He doesn't like it!" laughed Makar Vasilievich.

"We need people who love the mine!" the host shouted, and even smacked the table with the flat of his hand. "Why worry about it. We need men of our own kind, not white-gloved aristocrats."

"That's easier said than done!" cried Makar Vasilievich. "Engineers aren't mushrooms—they don't grow with the rain!"

"That's just what I'm getting at! All the more reason why our young people should study. They have the opportunity. And when they've had their training, we'll set the Kazimir Savelieviches aside, so's they shouldn't be in the way."

"And the manager, too, while we're at it," Ivan growled.

"Yes, our manager's a wash-out!" said Makar Vasilievich. "He has plenty to say for himself—makes a big noise like an empty tub." He waved his hand with disgust.

"Uneducated!" Ivan briefly commented.

"Where the devil did he come from?" Prokhor said. "They say he isn't a miner even."

"D'you remember Yegor Trofimovich, Prokop?" Makar said, suddenly smiling.

"Do I?"

All the old men started smiling in a warm happy way; Yevdokia Petrovna smiled, too. That man must have meant a great deal to them to make them honour even the memory of him with a minute's hushed and reminiscent silence. Or was it for them merely a sad sigh for lost youth?

"Who was that?" Andrei asked timidly.

"Who, Yegor?" the host laughed. "Ah, my dear boy, that cannot be told in so many words! But what's this—talking of Yegor over empty glasses?" he suddenly cried gaily. "Let's drink his health!"

"Here's to Yegor, may God send him good health and a long life!" Makar said, raising his glass. "He was one of us old sinners, I believe—never touched a glass. Is he still alive?"

"You bet! He'll outlive us all! He's a big man now in the coal line."

"He was a funny chap!" Makar laughed. "I remember him turning up at the colliery back in '21. He got all the miners together right away. 'Look here, you blokes,' he says, 'I'm your new Red Manager of the colliery now.' Of course, that set everyone laughing. Wouldn't believe it! Who didn't know Yegorka hereabouts? He was a local man."

"Some people *were* a bit surprised at first. How comes it—one of their own men, a collier, suddenly made manager? Round about that time he went and got himself a turnout. D'you remember his four-wheeler?" said Prokop Maximovich.

"I should say so!" Makar laughed. "Pair of black horses. And a coachman with a beard."

"Yes!" Prokop went on, his eyes sparkling. "'Our Yegor's getting too big for his boots,' the miners started saying. 'Become a bourgeois.' He got to hear about it. 'All right,' he says, 'I'll show you bourgeois!' In those days the pay-roll money was drawn in town, and the manager had to go for it himself, with the cashier. Well, when pay-day came round, Yegor takes the cashier along with him—our cashier was a little old fellow, he died soon afterwards—and he sets out for town with him . . . on foot. Yes, on foot!" he cried, laughing. "Well, one day goes by, then another day, and no sign of Yegor or pay. The miners started making inquiries at the office. 'Where's Yegor?' 'He's walked off to town.' 'What d'you mean walked off? Hasn't he got a carriage?' 'I don't know,' says the book-keeper. 'He and the cashier went on foot.'" Prokop Maximovich paused, like an experienced story-teller. "He was

away a fortnight!" he brought out with impressive effect. "Probably attending to some business in town. At last he turns up. Naturally, everyone asks him—What's kept you so long, Yegor? 'Twenty versts is a pretty long step,' he says. 'But why didn't you take the carriage?' 'Oh, no,' he says. 'No more carriages for me. I might turn a bourgeois. From now on I'm always going to walk,' he says. Then everyone fell to begging him: 'Damn it all, we'll send the cap round and buy you an aeroplane, only for Christ's sake don't take any more walking trips!' 'Ah!' he says. 'So now you see what a manager needs a carriage for?' "

The story was greeted with laughter.

"Yes, he was a funny chap!" Makar repeated tenderly. "But he was a real brick, didn't give himself airs. He'd drink vodka with us colliers, and acted godfather in many a family. As for work, there he was a tiger. People were afraid of him. But then he knew the mine as no engineer knew it."

"And d'you remember the strike?" Ivan said suddenly. These reminiscences apparently had stirred him up too. He seemed to have thawed.

"Ah!" Prokop Maximovich laughed. "So there was! Yes! Of all the crazy ideas! I don't suppose you boys have ever seen a strike?" he said, turning to Andrei.

"No, how could we?"

"And you never will now. At least, not in this country! We often went on strike before 1917. Why, yes! But here our men took it into their heads to go on strike in '22. Under our own government, mind you! I don't remember now what the demands were. It was a hard time, of course. Country disorganized. No bread, no potatoes. . . . So they struck. Sat around the office, sunning themselves, and refused to go to the mine. Their ringleader was a sneaky old cuss by the name of Kvasha. Well, we all went out to them--the whole Party group--started

talking to them, trying to bring them round. But it was no use! We were none too educated ourselves at that time. We appealed mostly to the men's conscience. As luck would have it, Yegor Trofimovich was away! He'd gone to town on business. We were in a pickle, I can tell you!"

He glanced at the boys, and smiled.

"At last Yegor came back. We reported to him about the strike. 'I see,' he says, 'a strike! All right,' he says, 'I'll come out in a minute.' Then the boys went out to the strikers and told them not to go away because there'd be a palaver. 'Why, has Yegor come back?' says Kvasha. 'He has. He'll be here in a minute.' Kvasha stood scratching his head for a while, then he says to his boys: 'Let's better go out to the pit, lads! Yegor has come. Better give him a wide berth, damn it!' Well, when Yegor Trofimovich came out on to the porch, there wasn't a sign of any strikers. They were all in the pit already, working!"

"People were afraid of him!" said Makar. "Not because of his power, but because of his personality. Of his tongue, too. What a tongue he had—sharp as a razor! And he himself wasn't afraid of anybody."

"But he was afraid of me!" Yevdokia Petrovna suddenly said.

"Why, yes!" Makar said with surprise, and after a moment's reflection: "He *was* afraid of her."

"And he still is!" Yevdokia Petrovna added with a laugh.

Andrei looked at her with respect and a certain awe. He was afraid of her, too. Yet he felt that if he were in trouble, she was the only person he would go to for advice. In her, it seemed, lay all the worldly wisdom of the miners. She could not advise anything but good.

She sat at the head of the table like a matriarch, silent, erect and stern; she was seventy-five, older than the oldest shaft in the Donbas. She had come out here to the steppe with her father when the place was a wolf-ridden

wilderness. How much—good and bad, but mostly bitter and terrifying—her wise observant eyes had seen.

Now here she was, sitting at this table, stern but kind, proud of her children and grandchildren. Was she listening to their noisy talk? Or was she wrapt in thoughts of her own? What was she thinking of?

He felt a sudden impulse to get up, go down on his knees before her and say softly: "Give me your blessing, grandma!" He knew now definitely that he would become a miner.

He did not know himself how it happened and how he plucked up courage to do it, but he stood up to his full height while all the rest were sitting, and said in a voice that shook with emotion:

"I . . . I . . . want to say. . ."

And only when there came an expectant hush and all eyes turned on him did he realize what had happened. Thrown into confusion, he forgot what he wanted to say and what he had got up for.

"Come on!" the host cried encouragingly.

"Well, why don't you go on?"

He stood overwhelmed and utterly at a loss.

Looking at his face, red with confusion and dismay, everyone laughed—everyone, that is, except the old lady; she had not even smiled. She looked at him kindly and calmly, as if to say: Don't be shy, we'll understand you!

He squeezed the words out of himself—not, of course, those singing heartfelt words that thronged his soul, but others, quite different ones that were pitifully inadequate to express his feelings.

"What I wanted to say . . . Grandma . . . I mean Yevdokia Petrovna . . . I mean, let's drink to her . . . that's to say, to her health."

"Hurrah!" the host shouted at the top of his voice, then suddenly running over to Andrei he gave him a terrific hug and a kiss.

"Splendid!" he breathed hotly into Andrei's ear. "You couldn't have said better! Splendid!" Then, with his arm still round the boy's shoulder, he turned to the old lady and shouted: "Well, mother, are we going to adopt this young scrap of a miner as our grandson?"

Everyone began clapping and cheering; the men went up to Yevdokia Petrovna to clink glasses.

"Father left seven of us, Ma," said Ivan. "You've brought us all up, Ma, made men of us. We bow to you!"

"Thank you, thank you, children!" said the old lady, all in a flutter. "And I too have lived to see better times with you. And thank you, Andrei dear! Though I have never seen you before, you are like one of my own. Thank you! And thank you all, good people!" She bowed to the company. "You don't forget an old woman, it's so gratifying. It would be nice to have a cry now," she said most unexpectedly, "but I haven't learnt how to cry, that's my trouble. What do you say, Nastya, should I?" she shouted to her daughter-in-law.

"I don't think people weep for joy, Mamma!" the latter answered, laughing.

"Well, as for weeping for sorrow, I've never done that in all my born days!"

After dinner the host himself saw the boys to the gate. He was especially affectionate with Andrei, but he treated Victor kindly too and no longer frowned on him.

"Drop in, boys," he said, walking through the yard with them. "Whenever you feel like it! Ah, what a fine day it is!" he said, squinting at the sun. "Probably the last. The autumn here is bad. Rain, rain—gets on your nerves."

He saw them up to the wicket and stopped.

"This is a nice street, all green," Andrei said "What lime trees!"

"Planted them ourselves," the miner said. "We have to live here, you know! See that wattle fence over there? My father-in-law lives there. You happen to be working right under his garden."

"What d'you mean?" Andrei said.

"What I say! Our seam runs right under his garden. And out there runs the 'Mazurka' seam. And the main level will be right here." He traced lines in the air and Andrei watched his hand, fascinated, as if it were a magic wand, throwing open the innermost recesses of the earth. "What did you think? The miner has a two-storey house. A mansion! I work below, there's my business office, and up here I relax and drink vodka with my friends." He laughed. "Well, drop in. You know the way now. Don't worry about Dasha, I'll chain her up." He held both hands out to the boys.

"Please forgive me, Prokop Maximovich," Victor suddenly said; he had been wanting to say it all the time, and was agitated. "I said a foolish thing at the table ... offended you ... I'm sorry. I was a fool to. . . ."

"Oh, think no more of it!" the miner interrupted him in a cordial tone. "I've forgotten all about it!"

"But I haven't ... I'll never again. . . ."

Andrei glanced at his friend in surprise; he had never known Victor to admit himself to be in the wrong.

They took leave of Prokop Maximovich and went home. For a time they walked in silence.

"What you said ... about Grandma ... was fine," Victor said suddenly in a low voice. "And I'm a pig!"

"Oh, nonsense, Vitya!"

"Don't interrupt me! I know what I'm saying. I'm a pig." He walked gloomily ahead of his friend and did not look round at him any more.

"Miner, give more coal!" said a poster hanging opposite Victor's cot. It was the first thing his eyes opened on in the morning, before he saw the light in the window. The familiar words stared at him. They battered against his ears, like the wakening whistle of the Steep Maria. Sometimes he even saw them in his dreams. He would get up. The day had begun.

He would hurry off to the pit by the now familiar road. Similar posters hung on the walls of the houses and on the fences. "Miner, the country expects you to give more coal!" shouted the inscription over the check-gate.

"How's output?" he would ask, meeting the boys of the night shift by the cage. "How's output?" men would ask him when he came outbye. "How's output?" was the question on everyone's lips. People from the Town Party Committee asked it; headquarters telephoned it; and the newspapers in the morning were full of it. The colliers' wives discussed the previous day's output around the street pumps.

On days when the mine fulfilled its plan, a little red star lit up high above the headframe. Those were gala days. Retired collier Uncle Onisim would have the floors scrubbed clean in the hostel and treat himself to a small bottle of vodka. Such days were rare, however. The mine was in difficulties. The word "hitch" became as current as the word "output." They ran together in harness, like a pair of winded old crocks.

"We've run up a tremendous debt in coal!" Prokop Maximovich would exclaim with bitter shame at the meetings. "A fine state of affairs! And who do we owe it to? The country! How much do we owe it? Eighteen thousand tons! I never owed a man a kopek all my life, ask anyone you like!"

There was only one man at the colliery who refused to believe in any "hitch" and said so—Kazimir Savelievich, the chief engineer.

"Who says there is a hitch?" he would say, crinkling his nose, on which sat a gold pince-nez, with distaste. "We're working as we've always worked. There are no falls, no roof trouble, no accidents of any kind."

"But the plan, Kazimir Savelievich, what about the plan?"

"If there's a hitch, then it's somewhere on paper," he would answer testily. "It's a paper-plan hitch. Why do you draw up plans that people can't fulfil?" he would ask maliciously.

He had supporters and followers, overt and covert; the colliery manager himself secretly agreed with him, for all that he raved and foamed at the meetings: "We'll fulfil the plan if we have to die doing it!" A fierce battle raged at the colliery between those who supported the plan and those who opposed it.

War was rife at the neighbouring collieries, too, and throughout the Donbas, throughout the country—in town and village—war between the new and the old. The kulak rabble, routed in the villages, now made their appearance at the mines; Sviridov was a quiet one by comparison. They had come out here not to lick their wounds, but to fight again; the empty galleries of the pit seemed to them a convenient battle-field. They looked upon everything with a hostile eye; they saw an enemy in every machine; it reminded them of the tractor, which had rooted them out of their warm icon-decked homes. And they wrecked the machines; they worked evil by dark underhand means, each on his own, each afraid of the other; they spread absurd rumours. Doomed, they could only snarl and bite, sometimes painfully; they were powerless to arrest the oncoming tide.

Between the two camps, blundering back and forth across the Donbas, was a motley, drifting mob of all sorts; there were kulaks here and workers; professional "rolling stones" and tramps; peasants, seeking mines where the coal was soft and the earnings big; thieves, fugitives from justice, and even monks whom hunger had driven out of impoverished monasteries. There were shady characters here, too, queer silent fish, who asked many questions but did not like to answer any.

This vast uncontrollable horde flooded the collieries, threw them into a fever, turned them into a sort of way-side tavern. People came without warning and left without warning, and the section overman did not know how many men would come down in his shift. These men also brought with them into the mine the mental attitude of the tavern: they held nothing dear here, were responsible for nothing and loved nothing. They loafed about the colliery town, got drunk, raised brawls, had knife fights, gambled at cards on the market, sold the work-clothes they had received only the day before and the blankets stolen from the miners' hostel, then suddenly "struck camp" and moved out to a different mine, where they got drunk again, raised brawls in the hostel and sold stolen things.

Below they worked unwillingly and badly, but then they gave the colliery manager a splendid excuse for exclaiming at the meetings:

"What can you expect, comrades! Labour flux, not enough real cadres!" And rubbing his shaved bald head, he would add ruefully: "Ah, if we only had cadres, cadres!"

That was why the regular miners gave such a warm welcome to the mobilized Komsomol boys; they looked upon them not as successors, but rescuers; hoped that they would infuse young blood into the Donbas, bring to the struggle the revolutionary ardour of youth, Komsomol elan. "Oldsters" like Prokop Maximovich hoped for great

things from the Komsomol boys, and it would be a shame and disgrace to disappoint those hopes.

Fyodor Svetlichny realized this and took the matter to heart. Every Komsomol boy who ran away from the mine was not merely a deserter, he was a traitor, who had run over to the enemy's camp. Every boy who worked poorly in the pit was not just a loafer, but a traitor who was letting all his comrades down. Hundreds of eyes—friendly and hostile—now watched the Komsomol boys.

"We're in the firing line, boys!" Svetlichny repeated to his comrades every day. "Our Party has started an offensive!" And he told them what was going on in the country.

Andrei was one of his most eager listeners. For the first time in his life he felt himself to be in the ranks, the fighting ranks of a big army. The lines, strung out from the White Sea to the Black Sea, went into action, and he was in one of those lines. His post was the working face, his weapon the pick. His and Victor's pupilage ended all too early and abruptly. The mine needed coal-hewers. They both received benches for independent working, and every day at stint assignment they got a daily quota. Their share of the colliery's general plan was a paltry one, but such as it was Andrei was proud of it.

"D'you know what plan the mine's got?" he said to his friend. "A tremendous plan! Prokop Maximovich says we'll have a stiff job handling it under present conditions."

Victor, however, did not know the colliery's new plan. It did not interest him. All he cared about just now was his own quota, his own work.

His world had strangely narrowed. Strictly speaking, the working face had become his whole world now. Here he lived, worked and thought. It was a tiny world—twenty-eight inches high, and a bench long—but even this he was unable to cope with, he who had once dreamt of conquering the world!

After that memorable evening at Prokop Maximovich's, Victor had said to himself: "I must become a miner! Whether I like it or not, I must! I've got to stick it out!"

He fell to work in earnest. He was still a learner then. He became more attentive to what his teacher said; in an attempt to master the pick he blistered his hands until they bled.

But the coal eluded him and he fell behindhand. Now he had to coax himself to work.

"I must, I must!" he repeated to himself over and over again. He had to work. One could not live without work, anyhow. Of course, he could have worked at Magnitnaya, or at the tractor plant in Stalingrad, or even sailed aboard a whaler in the Sea of Okhotsk. But he had come to a coal mine instead. Ah, well! Then he would have to work in the mine, that's all. Cut coal, curse it! He must, he must! And he did. He hewed the coal, sweating profusely, his body bent up double, choking with acrid coal-dust and all but crying. Hew as he would, however, he could not give his quota.

He had but one desire now—to cut his shift quota of coal. Mitya Zakorko was giving double output quite easily.

Mitya Zakorko's name was in everyone's mouth at the colliery those days. It was that same Mitya-the-"footballer," Victor's first teacher, with whom he had fallen out at the very start. Mitya now had the right to chaff Victor. The other day he had crawled into Victor's working and said mockingly:

"Hey, Victor! I've done two quotas, and can take you in tow. Want some help, eh?"

But Victor was not out for setting records, and he no longer thought of fame. All he wanted was to cut his quota for the shift and then come to the hostel and throw into Svetlichny's face, right into his face:

"I've done my quota. Well?"

He knew that Svetlichny would ignore the insolent tone and cry out joyfully:

"Bravo!" and grip his shoulders. "You're not lying?"

But he had not once cut his coal quota yet.

He would come home tired and fling himself on to his bed straightaway. Around him all was noise and excitement—the boys were going to the club and the cinema—while he lay staring dully at the ceiling. He seldom spoke to anyone those days, even to Andrei.

Andrei was not giving his quota either. He worked hard and willingly, for he had grown to love the mine—its sage silence and the pensive solitude of the working face—and found joy in the unseen toil of the miner; but he was slow, awkward and clumsy; try as he might, he could not cope with the quota.

Time flew so fast that he was barely conscious of it; it seemed to trickle through his fingers. From Antipov he learned to be thorough and tidy in his work, but he had not yet acquired his teacher's skill.

Andrei was by nature unwieldy and slow-moving—no wonder they had called him "slowpoke" at school; he moved about heavily in his burrow, puffing like a grampus, and did not get into his stride until the end of the shift, but then it was already too late.

He went outbye, feeling crushed and ashamed. Like Victor, he was harassed by a sense of failure, but unlike Victor he blamed only himself for it. How would he look Prokop Maximovich and Svetlichny in the face now? Prokop Maximovich would still try to cheer him up—Never mind! You'll learn it in time!—but Svetlichny was unforgiving.

He had but one answer to all complaints of "I can't" and "it's impossible":

"Why can I?"

He would never demand of others what he could not have demanded of himself. But then he never demanded

less than he was capable of doing himself. If he could do a thing, why should not other people be able to do it?

Why did Andrei stand in such awe of Svetlichny? Svetlichny was not a chief, nor even a team leader. But he was the Komsomol organizer, and that was something greater than authority—it was conscience.

He would ask Andrei, ruthless as one's own conscience: "Well, how's output?" And Andrei would hang his head in silence.

"Ugh, you!" Svetlichny would say with a gesture of disgust. "All you can do is let people down."

This was unanswerable. He, and Victor, and Malchenko, and Gleb Vasilchikov, the boy from Kharkov, were really letting them down—the whole Komsomol working.

The Komsomol working was Svetlichny's child. It was he who had insisted on the Komsomol boys being given a separate working, where they could show their mettle and stand on their own legs. Struzhnikov, who had supported the idea, proposed that the local Komsomol boys as well as the mobilized boys should work there. That was a sensible proposition, since there were real skilled coal-hewers among the local Komsomol. And so the Komsomol working had come into being. Mitya Zakorko was its pride, Victor its disgrace.

No matter how Victor "kennelled" himself up in his little world, and how hard Andrei puffed and sweated at his working face, they were both in the public eye, and their doings were chalked up on the emulation board hanging over the check-gate. The poor work those two Komsomol members were doing was there for everybody to see.

"It's a disgrace!" Struzhnikov sighed, frowning. "Makes you feel like wanting to run away from the mine!"

In the evenings Svetlichny had the boys up for "confession." He would sit down on Victor's cot and start at him:

"What is it interferes with your work? Out with it! What's the reason?"

"Leave me alone!" Victor would say quietly.

"I won't! Aren't we touchy! There must be some reason!" Svetlichny kept at it.

"Leave me alone! Go away!"

"I can't make you out! Do you realize that thanks to you we are not even fulfilling seventy per cent?"

"All you care for's per cent!" Victor said with a bitter smile. "What about the man?"

"Yes, per cent!" Svetlichny answered calmly. "That is the index of a man. Take Mitya Zakorko—he's giving double output. It works out that he's a two-hundred per center, he's worth three of you. And what are you—a seventy per cent damp squib? Ugh, you!" He gave Victor up and went over to tackle Andrei, Vasilchikov and Malchenko.

"I've come to plague you now," he said. "Hate me, eh? Well, well! Better elect someone else as Komsomol organizer, someone who's more kind-hearted."

"Why, we're quite satisfied with you," Vasilchikov said ingratiatingly.

"But I'm not satisfied with you. How's the quota?"

"It's not as if I don't want to do it! I do, with all my heart. . . . It's not my fault if I can't!"

"Why can I do it? Why can Osadchy do it? Why can Ocheretin do it?"

Indeed, why could Ocheretin do it? He was the last man anyone would have thought capable of bringing it off.

Sergei Ocheretin was a fidgety, tousled young chap of the slapstick-comedian type; he was all twitches and winks, not only his eyes and face, but even his shoulders, his hands and hips. There was something indecent about it. His was the type one could meet at any club-revel in the village, and his calling was to amuse people. No one takes such boys seriously.

"I'm a hooligan, boys!" he had introduced himself in the train, coming out. And he had beamed on everyone out of radiant blue eyes. In the rare intervals when he was not winking one noticed that he had fine clear eyes, the colour of the sky.

"There was a whole plenary session over me, boys. Sat for two days," he had said boastfully, with a wink. "It's a fact! Two whole days! They couldn't make up their minds whether to expel me or have me turn over a new leaf. And then they got a brain wave—packed me off to the mines."

All through the journey out he had related his successes at evening parties and boasted of the number of hearts he had broken. It was plain to everyone that the lad was lying. But he lied artistically, beautifully and somehow very engagingly, neither expecting it to go down nor taking offence when anyone told him to his face that he was a liar.

"So I am!" he would agree. "Why do you listen to me then? That means I'm a good liar. Maybe I intend to become a writer. Why not?"

Everyone chaffed him, and when his idle chatter became irksome, he was simply told: "Go away, Sergei! You're a nuisance!" And he complied.

No one took him seriously here either. Svetlichny had watched him with an anxious eye. "This one will be the first to run away!" he thought.

But he had not run away. On the contrary, he was the first to make himself at home at the colliery, contracting a number of friendships and even boasting of having girls among his acquaintances. Twice he had come home late and well in his cups. When Svetlichny started taking him to task for it, he heard him out meekly and sighed:

"You're right. I'm a hooligan. Our secretary used to tell me off the same way." Then he glanced curiously at

the Komsomol organizer and said: "Going to expel me now?"

When the boys were being distributed by professions Ocheretin presented a problem.

"What are we going to do with this fidget? Try him on horse-putting or timber-pushing?"

"Try him at putting on airs," Malchenko had said, attempting a pun.

Ocheretin was given a job as timber-pusher, but within a few days he somehow got himself transferred to the working face as a hewer.

"You can make better money at the working face, boys," he had explained, winking. "First thing I'll do when I draw my pay I'll buy myself a scarf. A silk one with a fringe. And galoshes. Never wore galoshes in my life—must try it!"

He was sincerely incapable of understanding the boys who ran away from the mine.

"And where the blazes are they running to? Back to the village! How d'you like that? As if you can compare the village to the mine! Here you have culture! Every day the cinema, Sunday football. Funny chaps!"

No one, of course, believed him when he announced one day that he had cut his daily quota of coal.

The statement had merely raised a laugh.

"Can you fib, Sergei!"

He had joined in the laugh. Winked. Then started spinning a yarn about his love affair with Nastya, the lamp girl.

"It's a terrific affair, boys. Nastya's got a boy in the navy."

But he had really fulfilled his quota. And the next day too. And the day after that again. He was now looked upon as one of the Komsomol working's dependable coal-hewers.

In the evenings at the hostel he now boasted about how much he had earned and what he was going to buy with the money.

"I'll buy myself a suit, boys. Pure wool. And a pair of smart shoes. And I'll give Nastya a present, hang it all—a silk jumper. She'll get a kick out of it." An orphan, recently a farm labourer, who had never known the feel of a ten-ruble note, he was almost intoxicated by the prospect of being able to buy whatever his heart desired. In imagination he had bought more than he had earned. "And I'll buy a guitar or a bicycle. I'll pedal down to the mine like a bourgeois. Won't that be posh, boys!"

"You're a grabber, Sergei, that's what you are!" Gleb Vasilchikov, who had not once fulfilled his quota yet, said to him one day.

Ocheretin was dumbfounded.

"Who, me?" he said, his fair eyelashes blinking rapidly.

"Yes, you! A low-down mean kulak," Vasilchikov repeated.

Sergei, who had never in his life taken offence at anybody and was inured to all kinds of abusive language, suddenly felt insulted.

"Why does he say I'm a grabber, Svetlichny, eh?" he appealed pathetically to the Komsomol organizer. "I may be a hooligan, I don't deny it, but I'm not a grabber! I'm not stealing anything from anyone."

"What was that you said about Sergei?" Svetlichny said to Vasilchikov quietly, his brows almost meeting over the bridge of his nose.

"I said he's a grabber. Come out here after big money."

"And what did you come for?"

"Me? Because it was my duty," Gleb answered importantly.

"And is it duty that prevents you giving your quota?" Svetlichny said.

"What's that got to do with it?"

"A lot. Talk about duty is not worth a tinker's damn if there are no deeds to back it. You're a windbag, that's what you are, an empty chatterbox! As for Sergei," he said loudly for all to hear, "he's the real stuff! He can look everyone squarely in the face, because he's doing his duty—producing coal. The money he has earned is honest money."

"There, honest money!" Sergei cried, perking up at once and winking.

The day after this conversation his name appeared for the first time on the honour board. Andrei pointed it out to him, for he would not have noticed it himself.

"There, read it!" Andrei said without envy. "S. I. Ocheretin."

Sergei stared at the board aghast.

"Who's S. I. Ocheretin? What for?" he said, bewildered.

"It's you!"

"Golly!" he said incredulously and read the inscription again. "How did they know my initials?"

"Got it from your papers. Come along, you'll brag about it in the hostel."

But Sergei was not to be torn away from the board.

"So it's really me?" he said with a grin, then suddenly started roaring with laughter. "Got it right too! S. I.! The genuine article! Hold on!" he said with dismay. "Maybe it's a mistake? Not me at all? What d'you think? Maybe tomorrow they'll wipe it off?"

"If you start working badly they will."

"Why, yes. Of course. But otherwise they have no right, have they?"

"No. Come along, now!"

They walked away, but Sergei kept looking back at the board.

That evening he was ceremoniously presented with the Red Card of a shock-worker. A photographer came to the

hostel to make flash-light pictures of the shock-workers. Everyone expected Sergei to play some trick when his turn came. In fact, he winked mischievously to the boys, sprawling in the arm-chair, but the next moment sat up with a start. "This photo will be hung up on the board!" the thought shot through his mind, and he broke into a sweat. "This is no joke!" And so he came out on the photograph—startled and bewildered, with a tuft of hair sticking up over his forehead, like a young cockerel.

"Name?" the photographer asked matter-of-factly.

"Sergei Ivanovich Ocheretin," Sergei answered in a voice that did not sound like his own. He was obviously thrown off his balance. The old slapstick-comedy line was now impossible for S. I. Ocheretin, and there was no new line yet.

He wandered about like a lost soul for several days, then came to Svetlichny.

"I've done a hundred and twenty per cent today," he said moodily and glanced at the Komsomol organizer.

The latter was overjoyed.

"Splendid! Fine!"

"Yes," Sergei hesitated. "But what next?"

"What next?" Svetlichny laughed. "Shoot it up to a hundred and fifty."

"All right. I'll do a hundred and fifty."

He shifted his weight from one foot to the other, then sighed.

"Have I a right to challenge Mitya Zakorko?" he suddenly asked.

"Why not? But he's giving double output."

"So will I."

He shifted his feet again, then said, without looking at Svetlichny:

"I don't suppose I have any right to have a drink now . . . seeing as I'm a shock-worker?"

"Why? It's all right—in moderation."

"Won't they cross me out for it?"

"Not if you keep within bounds," the Komsomol organizer laughed.

"I see!" Sergei muttered, then suddenly burst into a hearty laugh. "It's a scream! If anyone was to write home about me, they wouldn't believe it, I give you my word they wouldn't!" He wanted to wink, as usual, but it did not work this time. "Well, good-bye for the present!" he said sedately, and went out.

Svetlichny watched him go with a kindly eye.

"Who would have thought it!" he said to himself, shaking his head.

All that day he was in high spirits. He kept thinking about Sergei, and how, shuffling about awkwardly, the latter had fished for some new target for himself: "And what next?" The real man had stirred in him. And what a man! Proud, with a sense of his own powers and self-respect.

"But this was none of my doing!" Svetlichny honestly admitted to himself. "I hadn't even noticed him. It was the mine that woke him up, work. What shall I do to fan the flame now in Victor Abrosimov, in Malchenko, Vasilchikov? I'm afraid I'm not going about it the right way. I'll have to tackle them seriously."

So he "tackled" the laggards, shamed them, held Sergei up to them as an example and gave them what he called a "pumping." He was young and inexperienced, and thought it was enough to "pump" a man for him to go soaring skywards like a balloon. The difficult art of cultivating human character was still unknown to him; he was simply incapable of understanding the more delicate workings of the boys' minds and moods.

He lost his temper, shouted at them, made them feel small at the meetings, but could do nothing to help them. Especially Victor.

And Victor needed help. He was in a very bad way.

One morning Victor was awakened by a queer rattling—no, buzzing—of the window-panes. He started up and listened. The windows were buzzing. It was as if thousands of bees were beating against them, clamouring for admission.

“Ah!” dreary realization came to Victor. “The work whistle!” Suddenly he felt that today nothing could force him to get up and go to the mine. What’s more, he did not want to.

He let his head fall back on the pillow—it was a good, soft pillow from home—but did not shut his eyes. Facing his bed there still hung the poster: “Miner, give more coal!” The words, as usual, pounced on him as soon as he incautiously turned his head. Just then they were obnoxious. Especially that imperative “give!”

“I don’t want to!” Victor said, drawing the blanket up to his ears and turning noisily over on to his left side.

The panes still rattled and tinkled. It had struck the boy as a buzzing sound because he had been only half-awake. They were simply rattling, shaken by the tremendous chorus of whistles, which had never sounded so lustily all together as they did that morning. Usually they started one at a time, at intervals of five, ten and even fifteen minutes. But today they had started screeching all together, as if they had plotted deliberately to harass Victor.

He buried his head in the pillow. He wouldn’t get up! No, he wouldn’t!

But Andrei was already bending over him.

“Hi, get up, Vitya! It’s time to get up, old chap!” he said, gently but insistently shaking his friend, whom he thought to be asleep. “Get up! Don’t you hear the whistles?”

Victor sat up.

"What's the matter with them today, have they gone mad?" he muttered with annoyance, still undecided whether to feign illness or to say straight out: "No more for me!" He shivered, saying, "What a hell of a noise!" but did not get up.

"I suppose they set the clocks by the radio on account of the holidays, that's why the whistles have gone off all together," Andrei explained. "Come on, Vitya, get up!" he added pleadingly. "What are you thinking, really! You'll be late!"

"Oh, yes, tomorrow's a holiday, Seventh of November," Victor reminded himself. "Clean forgot about it. Have to get up, I suppose. Can't be helped."

He threw the blanket back reluctantly and started dressing. Andrei said:

"Quick, Vitya, hurry up!"

Victor obeyed listlessly. He had no will of his own now. He trailed obediently after his friend into the wash-room, the drying room and the dining-room.

The boys, as usual, trooped out of the dining-room in a body, headed by Svetlichny, and set off for the mine. Time was, at the beginning, when Victor liked to watch this solemn work procession and take part in it himself. Except for the miners, there was no one in the streets of the mining settlement at that hour, as there is no one on the battle-field except the soldiers. The miners were everywhere. They come down to the mine from all sides. Walk through the steppe in single file by numerous foot-paths; descend the hillsides, cross the gullies, some singly, others in groups, some at a leisurely gait, others almost at a run; but all silent, solemn, almost grim; there are no loud voices, no sounds of conversation or laughter, save for an occasional shout of greeting, like sentries calling to each other in the mist.... Within the purlieus of the mining settlement the lines of colliers grow denser; in the pale pink morning haze the picks look to Victor

like pole-axes, the lights of the safety-lamps like torches burning low against the time when they would be needed. . . . There is something menacing and warlike in this movement of the black human crowd through the steppe, perhaps because they are all moving in one direction, as though bound together by a common secret, a single will and a single aim. Here, as in an army, there are no casual outsiders; there are strangers, but not aliens; all men are different, but they are all miners. Within the hour this well-knit army would be hewing coal underground.

Meanwhile it is irresistibly seizing street after street in the mining settlement. Ever fresh reinforcements join it at the cross-roads; from all the streets and houses armed men pour into the soundless torrent, and all of them are armed with the same weapons—an axe or a pick, and clad in the same uniforms—the black collier's "velvet."

The only thing that grieved Victor then was that he and his mates did not look like real miners yet. Anyone could see that at a single glance at their brand-new dungarees, at their timid, chicken-like aspect. . . .

Now there was nothing to grieve over. No one would have distinguished the boys from real miners. They felt quite at home in the mining settlement. They walked down its streets boldly. Their dungarees were no longer new and clean, but much the worse for wear and smelt strongly of coal and the pit, as a soldier's greatcoat smells of powder and the trenches. The only thing that set the boys apart in that silent moving torrent was the gay lilt of their voices.

They kept up a merry chatter as they walked down the street.

"I'll lick Mitya Zakorko today!" bragged Sergei Ochetin. "I'll beat him—spit in my eyes if I don't."

"Yes, it wouldn't be a bad idea to touch off a record for the holidays!" said Svetlichny.

"The timber's holding me up, boys!" said Osadchy. "It's a damn shame, this timber business. You ought to see to it, Svetlichny."

"The timber isn't standard grade, that's a fact," Andrei interjected with a sigh. "You waste so much time picking out suitable props. . . ."

Victor took no part in the conversation. What could he tell the boys, anyway? They talked of nothing but the pit all the time. It was their chief interest now, the biggest thing in their lives. The collier's work had become a joy to them, but to him it was still a hateful necessity. Why the devil was he so unlucky? Perhaps he ought to ask for a transfer to a different shaft and become a horse-putter there? When all is said and done horse-putting was a sight jollier than cutting coal! It would be still better to join a cavalry school. And go off to the frontier. Somewhere far away, right out in the Far East. In the taiga. Hunting spies.

He could weave dreams and build air castles without fear of interruption. The boys seemed to have forgotten his existence, although he was walking at their side. Even Andrei, carried away by his conversation with Svetlichny, did not bother him. And when at last Victor found himself alone at his working face, he felt no more lonely than he had been with his friends on the surface.

Rather was he glad of this solitude—for the first time in his young life.

He had no desire to work. He set the bit, turned the pick about in his hands, then immediately laid it aside. Plenty of time to get his hands blistered and bleeding. He wouldn't manage his quota, anyhow. A little more than half, a little less—what difference did it make!

Yes, it would be good to get into a cavalry school! Or to go sailing the high seas. Cruise under sail across all the seas and oceans without a care in the world. He lay

down with his hands under his head and stared up at the roof. There, in its dim mirror, one could see all one's thoughts reflected, as on a screen. Sailing the high seas was a childish dream, of course. That would never be. Besides, sailing ships had gone out of use. But the taiga—now that was possible. If not a frontier guard station, then some new construction site. A lot of construction jobs had been started in the taiga. People said there was no sky over the taiga—just like the pit. You couldn't see it through the trees. But it wasn't so black in the taiga as it was here. It was all green out there, ever so green. And smelt of pine needles. . . . Cedars. . . . They were sort of pine trees, only bigger.

Before he knew it, he was asleep. He dreamt, not of the taiga and the frontier, but of a strange, unfamiliar, tropical country with a lofty lofty sky. In that sky, which somehow resembled the blue Psyol, Victor floated light-heartedly and tumbled about, striking out with his arms, like wings. This soaring sensation was wonderful.

The foreman shook him.

"There, look at that!" he cried with despair. "That's the kind of shock-workers we've got! I just can't stand it any more, Comrade Vorozhtsov!"

"Well, well," the man whom the foreman had called Vorozhtsov muttered gloomily. "Good people meet the holidays with achievements. And our idea of achievement is this!" He played his lamp over Victor's face. "Who are you? Eh? What's your name?" he demanded.

Victor was too stunned to answer him anything. His mind was in a turmoil. What had happened? Where had those two come from? Who were they?

"His name's Abrosimov!" the foreman answered for him angrily. "A Komsomol member."

"Komsomol?" Vorozhtsov queried incredulously. "Worse and worse. Sleeping at his post. Men are shot for that in the army, my boy." He lowered his lamp and

commanded curtly: "Get up and work! We'll talk about this later on."

Victor hastily seized his pick. Vorozhtsov watched him for a time, as he hacked the coal furiously and unskilfully, then withdrew without saying a word. Only after he had gone did Victor remind himself that Vorozhtsov was the new secretary of the colliery Party committee. So that was who had caught him sleeping at his work. What difference did it make anyhow—it couldn't be worse than it was.

Towards the end of the shift Andrei came crawling up, as usual. He was working in the upper seam.

"Well, how goes it, Victor?" he asked eagerly. "Cut your quota?"

Victor said nothing.

"D'you mean to say you haven't?" Andrei cried in dismay. "What a shame!" He looked at his friend with sympathy. "Just think what a day it is tomorrow. I've done mine, though!" A shy, happy smile crept into his face. He was dying to speak about it, but realized that it would be painful for Victor at the moment.

"Never mind!" he said, trying to console his friend. "Cheer up! You'll do it next time. It isn't so hard as it looks, you know. Where there's a will. . . ."

His friend's sympathy, however, only made Victor angry. Who wanted his condescension and his sympathy! He shouted with vexation:

"I could have done my quota easy as you like! You can take that from me. Only I'm ill. Ill! See? I've got a pain inside!" he shouted, almost in tears. "I ain't well! I lay down here for a minute . . . see? And Vorozhtsov thought I was sleeping."

"But why didn't you say so in the morning, Vitya?" Andrei cried in alarm, and seizing his lamp, he hurriedly moved up closer to his friend. "Maybe you shouldn't have come to the pit today? D'you feel bad? Eh?" He

played the light on his friend's face, just as Vorozhtsov had done recently; Victor's face was red.

"I'm not ill at all," Victor said hoarsely. "I just fell asleep. Slept like a son of a gun." He seized his tool, and without a glance at his friend, swiftly crawled out of the working. Andrei, utterly bewildered, followed him out. He understood one thing just then: his pal was in a bad way, a very bad way, and he could do nothing to help him.

In the pit yard they met Svetlichny. The latter already knew what had happened to Victor in the working.

"You've distinguished yourself again, Abrosimov!" he said irritably. "Are you doing this on purpose, or what? What do you mean by it?"

"But he's ill," Andrei hastily put in. "You just look at him, Fedya—he's a sick man."

"Ill?" Svetlichny said doubtfully, and gave Victor a close scrutiny. "Doesn't look like it. Oh, all right! Plenty of time to talk about that later. Let's go and get our pay. Maybe you'll feel better after it."

"We haven't got much coming," Andrei said shamefacedly.

"You'll get what you earned."

The earnings of the two friends made a very poor showing, however. Even the pay-clerk looked surprised and shook his head mockingly:

"Taking care of your health, I see, young man?" he said, handing Victor his money. "Ah, well! Health comes first, of course."

Victor crushed the notes in his hand and said nothing.

Yet how proudly he had dreamt of his first earnings! He had definitely decided that he would send a substantial part of it to his mother in Chibiryaki. "Here you are, Mamma. This will show you that your son is making good. Don't worry now, Mamma!" But apparently Mamma would have to wait a long time before she got a present from her good-for-nothing son. The money he and Andrei

had earned would not keep them in food. How were they going to live until the next pay-day? Borrow from their rich comrades? Those old notions of rich and poor had oddly changed. Sergei Ocheretin was rich, because he had worked well, and Victor Abrosimov was a poor man, because he slept at his work. There would be no pity for the poor man. Nor was this poverty a thing to be proud of. It was shameful poverty. Humiliating poverty. He was ashamed of it himself.

That evening a workers' meeting was held in the club. Victor was obliged to go there—inexorable Svetlichny insisted on it. The Komsomol organizer even sat next to him, as though afraid he would run away. But Victor had nowhere to run to. He only wished the earth would open and swallow him up. He understood that Svetlichny had not brought him to this meeting for nothing. Something was in store for him here, specially for Victor. But what? It could not be anything good, for Victor did not deserve that. Obviously it was something painful and shameful, otherwise Svetlichny would not have had fears of Victor running away. But what was it, what? And when was it coming?

It could be expected at any minute. From the moment that the secretary of the colliery Party committee, Vorozhtsov, the living witness to Victor's disgrace in the working, stepped on to the platform, Victor lost all peace of mind. He listened to the secretary's report with trepidation, expecting at any moment to hear the fateful words which would bring everlasting disgrace on the unfortunate name of Victor Abrosimov. But Vorozhtsov did not mention Victor's name.

After that, honours were done to the best team of coal-hewers—Prokop Lesnyak's—who were presented with the challenge banner. Victor saw the old man receive the banner carefully out of the hands of the secretary, then carry it with dignity across the whole hall, holding it in

front of him with outstretched arms. And Victor began clapping mechanically, because the whole hall was clapping.

Then honours were done to the best shock-workers, and there came out on the platform, among others, Osadchy, looking acutely embarrassed, Sergei Ocheretin, dazed with joy, and Mitya Zakorko, in clean clothes, with flaming red hair. And once more Victor clapped mechanically, along with the rest, and looked at Sergei, who blinked his fair eyelashes, and at Mitya Zakorko who, with his hand pressed to his heart, bowed coolly to the hall, for all the world like an actor taking the curtain. So great was the distance between those shining heights upon which Mitya, Sergei and Volodya Osadchy now stood, and the bottom of the chasm in which Victor floundered, that he dared not even envy his comrades. They were beyond his reach. Victor could only applaud them. And he thought, as he did so: "When will it be my turn? And what is it going to be like?"

At last the applause subsided, and Vorozhtsov said in a changed voice, quite unlike his own:

"And now we shall give the poorest workers their due!" He picked up a list from the table.

The very air in the hall underwent a sudden change. Only a few minutes before the meeting had been so good-tempered and amiable; people had applauded the heroes so kindly and good-naturedly, and laughed so heartily. And now the hall was hushed and frowning, as it were. Victor realized that his turn had come. He passed his tongue over his lips. His throat went dry.

Vorozhtsov read out the first name. It was unfamiliar to Victor, but the meeting knew it.

Voices arose immediately:

"Let him come forward! Step on to the platform!"

"He's a well-known shirker!"

"Have him up on the platform!"

“Let him face the people!”

“Let’s have a look at him!”

And strange to say, the shirker complied. Stumbling, red with confusion, looking small and pitiful, he stepped up the aisle amidst the jeers and catcalls of the whole hall. Yet he went! Had it been Vorozhtsov or any of the chiefs who ordered him to step up on to the platform, he would have protested and flatly refused. But he dared not go against the meeting of his workmates, against their verdict. He held his hands out to them with a helpless guilty gesture when he got on to the platform, as much as to say: Don’t be too hard on me, comrades!

All those whom Vorozhtsov called out followed him up to the platform—shirkers, drifters, idlers, “the scratch team of hitch champions,” as someone in the hall had dubbed them. The meeting punished them all in its own way, the workingman’s way: not by fines or penalties, but by that most terrible of all punishments which a workingman can mete out to an idler—scorn.

At last came Victor’s turn.

“I won’t go!” he said in a deadened voice when he heard his name called out, and looked imploringly at Svetlichny.

“You must!” the latter said sadly, and Victor, hunching his shoulders, got up.

“Never mind!” Svetlichny whispered to him in a friendly tone. “Go on. Can’t be helped.”

Victor went. Svetlichny followed him with his eyes. All he could see was Victor’s back. But that was enough. Svetlichny knew that he would never forget that back. “And I did nothing to help him!” he thought with bitter self-reproach. “Only swore at him, abused him and shamed him. I never spoke to him like a human being. Didn’t find the key to his heart. I really don’t know what kind of boy he is. Now he’s going up to the platform, while I’m sitting here, calmly watching the whole thing. And no

one thinks of blaming me, the Komsomol organizer, for it. He's going by himself. Everyone's looking at him. Hold your head up, Vitya! Come on!" Standing there on the platform, Victor had become the nearest and dearest person in the world to Svetlichny, a person he had to fight for.

But Victor did not know that. He saw neither Svetlichny nor Andrei, nor, for that matter, any separate face in the hall. He saw only eyes, hundreds of eyes, looking at him, and he quailed under their gaze. It was terrible to look people in the eyes when you feel guilty before them. He hung his head. But straight in front of him, in the first row, sat an old woman in a Budyonovka cap, and he could not help seeing her. She stared at him with a hard, resentful look that seemed to go right through him. "Why does she look at me like that? What have I done to her?" Victor thought with dismay. But the old woman continued to stare at him. Everything about her, from her bony fingers to the pointed tip of her cap, was prickly and implacable. She did not know Victor. But she had looked at each of the "scratch team" the same way. They were all the same to her—the men who were responsible for the Steep Maria's disgrace. Why had they come here to the mine, those strangers without shame or conscience? To disgrace us? Nothing here was dear to them. They had not shed blood here, nor tears, nor sweat. They had come after big money, while people here had not spared their lives for the Steep Maria. They slept at work, the shameless creatures, while our men were sleeping the eternal sleep in the common grave outside the shaft. And her poor Nikifor among them.

And the old woman looked at Victor with burning hatred.

Vorozhtsov named the last on the list.

"Sviridov!" he called. "Do you know that name?"

"We do, we do!" voices were raised. "Grabber!"

"Have him up on the platform!"

"What's the use?" someone said in a hoarse voice. "A fat lot he cares. That fellow doesn't know what shame is."

"All the same, let's see him!"

Victor, to his horror, saw Sviridov coming towards him, that same Sviridov who had played such a dirty trick on him and Andrei in the working. He wore the same round, shabby little sheepskin hat, grey collar and padded trousers; round his neck dangled a rough gaudy scarf, and on his feet were valenki with galoshes—as if Sviridov found life on this earth very cold, and wrapped himself up in felt and cotton-wool. He sauntered up to the platform with an air of complete unconcern, and winked cheerfully at his friends in passing. He gave Victor a friendly wink and even a playful dig in the ribs with his elbow. This was the last straw for Victor that evening, the worst humiliation he could have suffered. So this is what he had come to—landed in the same scratch team with Sviridov, under the same flag.

* 12 *

He wasn't eighteen. Strictly speaking, he was still in his salad days. What had happened to him at the colliery was merely one of life's everyday trials, his mistakes were the first mistakes of youth, the criticism at the meeting, the first severe criticism in his short life. It was simply that life turned out to be more complicated, rougher and stricter than he had dreamt, lying on the rosy sand by the Psyol. And most important of all, it was more exacting. It could lavishly reward a young man for his work, but it gave nothing gratuitously.

Victor, however, with his fervid and disorderly imagination, saw everything in deep black tints, as he had once seen them in bright rosy ones; he exaggerated, considered himself the most wretched, unhappy man, heading straight for disaster, almost a "gone-man" at eighteen.

It seemed to him that no one at the colliery thought of anything else but his disgrace, that henceforth only jeers and laughter would greet him wherever he went, that he was now branded forever with the stigma of the "scratch team," and that even the boys turned away from him with disgust and did not want to keep company with him any more. He forgot that he had run away from them himself after the meeting and had purposely come to the hostel when they were all asleep. Only Andrei and Svetlichny were anxiously sitting up for him. He brushed them off with a few perfunctory words and slipped into bed.

But he could not sleep. Apparently he had caught a cold that evening while roaming aimlessly about the settlement under the rain. The next morning he was unable to go to the October demonstration.

He lay all alone in the empty hostel, thinking about his life.

A meagre autumn light filtered through the windows. A slanting rain fell on the colliery settlement. In the distance loomed the head-frame; no star burned on it. Only a thin ribbon of pale-yellow smoke wavered over it like a banner.

Victor had always looked forward eagerly to the October holidays. He used to arrange with his comrades beforehand to come out in "Youth Rally" tunics. It imparted to the boys a military air. They drew the belts and shoulder-harness tight, and mercilessly drove the girls to the tail-end of the column. The boys would close the ranks sternly. The drum would beat a stirring tattoo. "Forward, march!" the secretary of the nucleus would shout in a breathless jubilant voice, and lead them out on to the square as if he were leading them to the barricades.

Their nucleus had been considered the best singers in the town. One of the Komsomol members, a school-teacher, who had recently arrived from Moscow, had

taught them songs which nobody in Chibiryaki had ever heard before. They sang "Bandiera Rossa" in Italian, and "Roter Wedding" in German, and were terribly proud of it. The whole of Victor's childhood and youth had been marked by songs of struggle, songs of the underground and the barricades. Those songs had taught him how to live, feel and think. He knew that life was a "struggle," he sensed "the raging storms of battle," was ready to stand to the "death before the onslaughts of drunken mercenaries," and he understood that there "was no other way, the last stop was the Commune."

Those songs expressed for Victor the whole code of honour of a Communard; if he were to face the enemy bullets, he would know what he had to do—he would stand without flinching and die with a song on his lips.

However, among all those songs which they had sung light-heartedly at demonstrations, at meetings, while waiting for the chairman's bell, at club evenings and on the night streets of Chibiryaki, there was not a single one about labour, about the coal mines and the five-year plan. Those songs had not been composed yet, or perhaps Victor simply did not know them. There was not a song that would have taught him what to do just now.

No, he could not go to the demonstration, side by side with Svetlichny, Ocheretin, Mitya Zakorko. He couldn't, he felt ashamed; and he couldn't sing now; he couldn't go to the mine tomorrow either; and he would never go out into the street, he would never dare to.

But he could not lie here either. He got up, dressed and went over to the window. The rain came down steadily. It lashed the street like the whip of a horse-putter, and the street shrank and darkened under its blows. Just now it looked like the narrow gloomy gallery of an old pit, with the dark low-hanging roof of the sky over it, with the splashing water and the dirty dripping walls,

with the wet sticky coal-dust lying upon everything; the rain itself was black, and the ground was black; and the brown naked poplars along the street did not look like trees, but like waste row props, and the ruts were filled with rusty black duff, like the spur-tracks at the mine; and there was no wind, no smells of grass, no breath of the steppe, only coal and smoke, and the acrid whiff of pyrites from the waste dumps.

"Even the rain here doesn't smell of rain, but of the pit!" Victor thought bleakly, and went over to the other window.

But here, too, was the colliery. The head-frame loomed wet and brooding, and the wheel of the winding engine revolved slowly and drearily.

"I'll never get used to it here!" Victor thought. "Just wasting my life!"

Ah, if only he could begin life anew! Make a fresh start at a new place. How splendidly he would work at a new place! It did not matter where, so long as it was far away from here, a place where no one would ever know of his disgrace, remind him of it with a grin. How hard he would work there! He would start all over again, without repeating a single mistake, humbly take lessons from the master workmen, then become a master himself. If only they would let him start over again at a new place. He did not know yet that life was not a running-track at a stadium, where one could return to the starting line after a faulty start and begin the race over again at the pistol shot. In life one has to start from the spot where one has stumbled or fallen.

He lay down on the bed again. He felt shivery, and pulled on the blanket. "I'm not going to stay here, I can't, say what you like!" One could live without fame at a pinch, but how was one to live with ill fame?

The boys came in from the demonstration, wet and happy. The wilderness in which Victor had been lying all

the morning suddenly filled with voices, laughter, life and bustle.

Andrei went up to the bed and looked at his friend with sympathy.

"Feeling better?"

"No."

Victor really was feverish. He slept badly that night, tossing about in his hot bed and tearing the blanket off himself deliriously. Afterwards he had a dim recollection of someone's cool hand on his brow, fragmentary visions and snatches of voices. Drunken Shubin in tattered pit clothes had dragged him along by the arm, winking at him, like Ocheretin. "I'm a god here, my boy, everyone's afraid of me. Come on, you'll be all right with me!"

"We'd better send for the doctor!" he had heard a familiar voice.

He woke up. It was morning. The whole pit-crew was gathered round his cot, all the boys in their pit clothes.

"We'll send for the doctor!" Svetlichny repeated and his voice sounded warm and friendly.

Victor saw Andrei's anxious face and Uncle Onisim's startled look; he felt awkward and annoyed, and suddenly got angry: what's the idea! I'm not dead yet!

"I don't . . . need . . . a doctor!" he said hoarsely, getting up on his elbow, angry and dishevelled.

Svetlichny looked at him again, this time with a long steady look, then moved away without a word. Andrei was left alone at the bedside. He shuffled about uneasily, helpless to do anything for his friend.

"Why don't you want the doctor, Vitya?" he pleaded with him. "We'll get a good doctor, don't you worry!"

"A doctor won't help me."

"What d'you mean? He's a doctor, that's his business."

"Leave me alone!" Victor said quietly, and Andrei fell silent.

He stood about helplessly by the bed, then ran out, came back with a jug of water and put it on a stool next to Victor's bed.

"In case you want a drink."

He felt a sudden desire to caress his friend—there was no one here dearer to him—but he did not know how it was done. He couldn't very well kiss him! All through their long and staunch friendship they had never indulged the softer emotions—they fought shy of sentimentality—they were not girls.

Meanwhile, the Steep Maria's whistle blew a second insistent blast, calling Andrei inbye. He glanced at his friend again and said apologetically:

"I'll be going then, Vitya, eh?" He waited for an answer, but not receiving it, ran out.

Victor was left alone. He was glad of it. The boys' presence irritated him. True, no one had reminded him of what had happened by so much as a word or a glance. "Showing tact," as if by arrangement. Their silence, however, was still more offensive. Better if they had sworn at him openly, as he swore at himself—anything but this silence! And that turning away of heads to hide mocking or sympathetic eyes. As if they could conceal them! From the moment Victor had got up on to the platform the eyes of his comrades were more terrible than the harshest and most pitiless words.

Suddenly the doctor came in, a genial chatty little old man.

"Well, young man, let's look you over!" he said, and began a thorough examination of the patient. "So, so, good, splendid!" he kept up a cheerful running commentary. "Now, let's breathe!" Victor submitted to all the doctor's orders. He stuck his tongue out, breathed, stopped breathing, thinking all the time: "I wonder if the doctor's been at the meeting? Does he know? Why doesn't he say anything about it? Is he being tactful too?"

"Well, well, nothing serious!" the doctor at length announced. "Grippe. Just common or garden grippe. Nothing more." Then he patted the patient on the shoulder jovially. "Still, you'll have to stay in bed a day or two. What? You don't like it? Nor did I at your age. As a matter of fact I hate lying in bed even now!" He wrote out a medical certificate, prescribed some medicine and went away. Ah, if only he could prescribe Victor a change of climate!

Uncle Onisim, the house-manager, came in during the day specially to see how the patient was getting on.

"That's nothing! You'll get it over!" he said. "I have a tubful of coal in each lung, but I'm none the worse for it! I breathe like a bird! That's because I breathe coal! Natural element, don't you see!"

He tried to amuse the patient—that is what he had come for. He began spinning yarns about the mine. There was nothing else he could have talked about, because he knew nothing else except the mine. He had spent all his life below, and only come to the surface to sleep.

"This has happened to you because you haven't been baptized," he made the surprising announcement.

"What?" Victor said absent-mindedly.

"I say, you're not baptized! In the old days when a new man came to the pit, he'd be told: 'Now don't forget to go and get your benediction, laddie, otherwise you're done for! You'll be crushed in a roof fall or be killed some other way as sure as eggs is eggs.' 'Who's going to bless me?' he asks. 'Is there a priest in the mine?' 'Why, sure! Can't do without a priest anywhere. We've got a special colliery priest. Father Spiridon. He stands by the shaft. You go up to him.' We really did have a shaftman—Spiridon. He was a likely-looking fellow with a long beard. We'd tip him off about the new boy, so he'd be ready for him. The lad looked round when he got out of the cage, and there was Spiridon standing, large as life. The shaft-

men wore loose overalls with a hood, like they do now. He did look a bit like a monk, I must say, especially with that beard. The boy takes his cap off and goes up to him, timidlike: 'Give me your blessing, Father Spiridon!' And that son of a gun takes a pail—he kept one specially!—and starts laying about with a wet broom, chanting: 'I give thee my blessing, God's slave, to work in the pit like a donkey and break your back for the boss! Amen!' That's how it was," he concluded with a laugh.

Victor smiled wanly.

"Aye! That's how it was!" the old man went on. "And you . . . why, you haven't seen a mine. Not you! D'you call this a mine? It's a health resort these days! The mine's grown kinder to men now—no falls, no blowers. And the work's easier too. And, look you, people are still not satisfied! They want the machine to do all the work for them. That's all you hear—mechanization, mechanization. Ah, I shouldn't be a bit surprised if they started a new fashion in coal cutting—with white gloves. . . ."

Victor was no longer listening to him. He was thinking dismally that tomorrow and the day after he would have to go down into the pit again, kennel himself up, hack coal, knock his sides against the walls and his head against the roof like a caged bird.

"So you don't like it here?" Uncle Onisim asked in a quiet casual tone. He had been studying Victor closely and sadly.

"I don't."

"Ah, well!" the old man said, shaking his head with an injured look. Then he got up and said warmly: "Ugh, you haven't been through the mill, you mother's darlings! Men of straw . . . pah!" He went out in a huff.

Aunt Nyusha, the caretaker, brought Victor his dinner. He ate it apathetically, without relish, and did not even notice what he was eating.

Just then the boys came back from the pit, carrying

on a heated argument which had apparently started underground.

"And I tell you it's a revolution!" black-eyed Osadchy shouted passionately. "A real revolution! Let Svetlichny say if it isn't."

"Revolution your grandmother..." Gleb Vasilchikov said mockingly. "Just psh! A flash in the pan!"

"But it's only the beginning! Can't you see! The aeroplane didn't fly at once either!"

"What a comparison! An aeroplane and a pneumatic hammer."

"What's wrong with that?" Osadchy cried vehemently.

"Because an aeroplane's a machine, while a pneumatic hammer—"

"And a pneumatic hammer is what?"

"A pneumatic hammer is just a . . . a tool . . . and not a perfect one at that."

Victor did not even try to follow the argument. He was far far away from it all.

"Oh, Vitya!" Andrei said, going up to his cot—he, too, was all worked up. "What a pity you're ill—"

"Why?" Victor said dully.

"We've seen a pneumatic hammer today! Uncle Prokop brought it."

"Ah. . ." Victor said listlessly.

Gleb Vasilchikov popped up again.

"Why did that Uncle Prokop of yours bring a pick with him too?" he asked Andrei slyly. "It's a sight, I tell you! They want to work with a pneumatic hammer, but they bring a pick along with them, just in case. It's like getting into a motor car and running a cart alongside it."

"That's true," Andrei admitted, somewhat taken aback, "the pick is still, er—"

"But it's only the beginning!" yelled Osadchy, running over to Victor's cot. The disputants were now all gathered around it.

"You see how it is, Victor," Osadchy said hastily, as if afraid Vasilchikov would interrupt him, "it's all a question of air pressure. When there's enough air, the hammer works like a clock. It just leaves the pick nowhere, like comparing a cart to a locomotive. But when there isn't any air or the pressure is low—"

"Then the pick comes in!" Vasilchikov interrupted him with a laugh.

"What do you expect—it's pneumatics!"

"You'd like it, Vitya," Andrei said timidly, and his face lit up with joy. "You would! Oh, I'm ever so glad!" He suddenly laughed. "It will make work so much easier now . . . not like the pick."

"Does that mean the pick's going to be chucked?" Sergei Ocheretin said quietly. He had been listening to the dispute all the time with a bewildered air.

"You bet! Done and dished!" yelled Osadchy.

"Don't you be too sure of that," Vasilchikov promptly retorted. "That Uncle Prokop of yours only worked an hour, all the rest of the time he used the pick." He argued just for the sake of arguing. If everyone had been against the pneumatic hammer he would have defended it just as fervidly as he was now condemning it.

"You're a scorpion!" Malchenko said to him, nettled, and Vasilchikov gave a joyful laugh, as if he had received a compliment.

"So that's how matters stand," Ocheretin muttered sadly and his fair eye-lashes began blinking rapidly.

"Don't you worry, Sergei," Svetlichny said, coming up. "You'll make a still better go of it with the pneumatic hammer!"

"No!" Ocheretin answered glumly. "That's machinery. I'm not up to it. It's for educated fellows." He sighed again bitterly, picturing to himself how they would wipe his name—S.I. Ocheretin—off the honour board.

At this point Vasilchikov pounced on Svetlichny like

a young fighting cock. He even took his spectacles off, "so's not to splash them," as the boys humorously remarked, hinting at his habit of sputtering when excited.

"D'you mean to say," he cried, "that you, a clever intelligent man, believe in that inflated gadget? Call that a serious machine? Do you really believe it?"

"I do," Svetlichny said. "And I call God to witness!" he crossed himself, and everyone laughed. "Don't you believe in it, young Cossack?"

"No! I don't."

"Then begone from our *kuren*!"*

"Begone!" Osadchy yelled exultantly, and all the boys flung themselves on Vasilchikov.

"Lemme go, you silly asses!" he cried, struggling free. "I'm for mechanization myself, but I stand for serious machines, and not a lump of iron—"

"Aha!" Svetlichny cried. "That lump of iron will now demand serious machines for itself. You won't be able to draw the coal out by horses now, you'll need electric traction motors. As our Donbas poet, Pavel Besposhchadny, said:

*It comes apace, that mighty age,
I hear the din and clash of its tread.
A single man will run the haulage
From working face to head.*

"What do you say, Victor?" he suddenly addressed Abrosimov.

"Eh? I suppose so!" Victor answered apathetically.

Svetlichny wondered, "What's the matter with him?" He had never seen Victor so apathetic and spiritless. The lad seemed to have frozen up. Much better if he had cut up rough, stormed and raved. Victor's odd numbness worried him. "This thing seems to have hit him hard!" Svet-

* A unit of the Zaporozhye Cossack Troops in ancient Russia.—*Tr.*

lichny decided to have a friendly talk with him. He had been putting that talk off for too long.

He bided his time until the evening, when the boys went off to the club to attend a meeting.

"How are you feeling?" he asked Victor, sitting down on the edge of his cot.

"I'm all right."

"I'd like to have a talk with you."

"What about?"

"About yourself."

Victor reflected a moment, then said indifferently:

"Go ahead!"

"Do you believe I'm your friend?"

"Supposing I do."

"No, you tell me straight, do you believe me or not?"

Victor sat up and grasped Svetlichny's hand impulsively.

"Are you really my friend?" he said.

"Of course I am!"

"If you are, let me go! Let me go!" he whispered hotly.

"Go where?" Svetlichny queried blankly.

"Let me go, Svetlichny! I've been a failure at the mine. Disgraced myself. It's my own fault. I know. I'm sorry. Let me go!"

"But where d'you want to go?"

"It's not as if I'm out for an easy life!" Victor went on whispering, still gripping Svetlichny's hand in his own hot one. "Send me anywhere you like. To Kamchatka. Sakhalin. Any godforsaken place. I'll cut trees, clear the taiga, anything you want. I'll show you what stuff I'm really made of. They'll write to you and the Komsomol branch about me, see if they don't. Let me go!"

"But how can I, Victor?" Svetlichny said with a faint smile.

"Can't you?"

"I haven't the power. Who can dismiss a soldier from the battle-field? And you and I are soldiers, my dear chap."

"So you can't?" Victor said again, and released Svetlichny's hand.

"Besides, I don't see why? You'll make a splendid go of it here, Vitya. Listen, let's talk like grown-up people," Svetlichny began with a kindly smile, but Victor interrupted him.

"If you can't, then leave me alone! D'you hear, leave me alone! Don't say anything!" he shouted wildly.

"Don't get excited, Victor! Really. You know!" Svetlichny said, frowning.

"Leave me alone!" Victor shouted once more, and turned his face to the wall.

There was nothing left for Svetlichny to do but to go away. Annoyed with himself and Victor, he went to the meeting, deciding that he would have another talk with the boy when he got better.

Immediately after Svetlichny went away, Victor sprang out of bed and began dressing hastily. He but dimly realized what he was doing. One thing he knew—he could not remain here a single minute longer. Life had to be begun anew in a new place.

So it meant running away? Running away from the mine? He stopped aghast in the middle of the room. Vividly he pictured to himself the Komsomol boys gathered round his empty cot; staring at it in silence; someone spitting in disgust; Svetlichny drawing his bushy eyebrows together contemptuously and muttering through clenched teeth: "the rotter!"; and Andrei hanging his head still lower. Poor Andrei, he might even shed a tear over him, as one does over a dead man; Victor would be a dead man then; his name would be struck out of the Komsomol lists with a black heavy line; and there would be no place for him, the deserter, among the living.

But immediately another picture rose before him. Victor always thought in pictures. He saw himself going to the mine again in a day or two, coming into the stint assignment room. Everyone who had been at the meeting would be there. They would recognize him. They wouldn't handle him too gently; start making fun of him right-away; point their fingers at him. And Sviridov was bound to go up to him, as if he were a pal of his, and say something on purpose for all to hear: Never mind, old chap, don't take it to heart! Look at me!

He hastily pulled out his box. No, run away he must! Damn the consequences! "It's not as if I'm running off to Chibiryaki, back to Mamma, for an easy life. I'm going out to the taiga! And will I work there—I'll make everybody sit up! I'll do things with such a bang that they'll forgive me everything." He flung his things into the box helter-skelter. "Have I forgotten anything? Oh, what does it matter?" He had but one thought—to get away from here as quickly as possible. "I ought to leave a note." "What for?" came the immediate afterthought. "What can I write? I have no excuse for myself just now."

"Oh, well, today I'm a rotter," he thought, gritting his teeth, "but tomorrow—"

He seized his box and made for the door at a run.

"Hi, Victor, stop! What are you doing?" he thought, already in the door-way. But he waved the thought aside and plunged into the street head foremost, as if taking a high dive.

* 13 *

Darkness had fallen.

There was no rain. November's early frosts were already carefully knocking together fragile ice rafts on the puddles and pools, and in the still evening air the young

ice could be heard freezing with a tinkling sound, like little hammers tapping away busily.

Victor ran blindly through the settlement, crushing the ice crust on the puddles and splashing the mud and black rain water about him; ran at breakneck speed, as if men and ghosts were hot on his heels.

But nobody, nothing lurked in the narrow crooked streets and alleys—neither acquaintances, of whom he had few in the town, nor memories, of which he had none to speak of. He was a newcomer here, still a stranger; only recently arrived, he had not gained a heart-hold on the mine, and now he was leaving it. Running away.

And good riddance! the mining town seemed to bid him a mocking farewell. Good riddance! We can get along without you! The power-house will breathe just as evenly, the wheel of the winding engine will revolve, and the steel ropes slide up and down just as smoothly; the “batches” will rush through the hauling gallery with a roar and clatter, and the tubs, clicking merrily over the joints, will run over the boarded trestle; and the blue-grey waste dumps will grow higher and higher—the pyramids of the miners’ toil. It was but little output you gave, lad, just occupying space in the working. We shall manage splendidly without you. But what about yourself?!

But Victor was now dead to the world.

He crossed the settlement and did not halt to draw breath until he came out on to the highroad. Phew! Now it was only three kilometres to the railway station. Tomorrow at this time he would be far away.

He glanced round. The road was not as deserted as he had first thought. Here and there, in front and behind him, people with suit-cases or with bags on their backs were lumbering through the mist; their hoarse voices and stamping feet came up on the wind. It flashed across Victor that they were runaways, drifters. He winced. “They

may take me for one, for all I know." The next minute he thought bitterly: "But aren't you? Got to grin and bear it!"

In the settlement no one would have suspected him of being a deserter. Even the box he was carrying was no evidence; people might think he was just going to the public baths.

But out here, on the road leading to the railway station, there could be only one interpretation. Victor would be put down for what he was—one of this dark crowd. Here they were all birds of a feather—hoboes, rolling stones, men without a home and kin, without shame and conscience, callous to love and truth. In them everything was false—their passports, their names and their souls.

And now he was one of them. A fellow traveller. He belonged to them, to their dark, kinless, gypsy tribe, and not merely for the brief duration of this walk to the railway station, but for a long time to come, perhaps for as long as he lived. What if he did have in his pocket a real genuine Komsomol card which, through cowardice—yes, cowardice!—he had not flung on the pillow when running away from the mine? He would not dare to produce it. Besides, he no longer had any right to it. "Komsomol members don't run away!" He would now have to conceal the fact that he had been a member of the Komsomol. Conceal the fact that he had run away from the mine. Conceal everything about himself. And live a false life, weighted down by a secret, among clean honest people. Could one live such a life?

Footsteps sounded close behind him, and someone could be heard breathing hard. Victor drew his head deeper into his shoulders and turned up his collar.

A man in an old greatcoat and a leather cap drew abreast of him. Victor stole a glance at him—he was an entire stranger. He felt relieved, and raised his head. Now

he could go on more calmly. They walked side by side, throwing an occasional glance at each other. The man in the greatcoat carried a box too—a drifter, probably. “One of us.”

Victor’s soul revolted at the thought. “No, I’m not one of them! What am I, though?”

The man in the greatcoat suddenly uttered a harsh, shrill sound, like the cry of a heron on a bog. Victor looked round, startled. What was the matter with the man? Was he crying? He looked again. No, he was laughing! What a queer sinister laugh. . .

“What’s the matter?” he said involuntarily.

The man laughed his queer harsh laugh again.

“The devil runs away from holy water. What are you running away from?”

“Who, me?” Victor said, taken aback.

“All of you!” The man pointed down the road where the shadowy shapes of men loomed in the mist like wandering ghosts. “I’d get them all together in a bunch and chuck ’em to hell down the shaft, head first! Are these the kind of people to build socialism with?”

Victor was silent.

“Locusts. . .” the man said. “Pests. . . Where the blazes did they come from? Such a thing has never been heard of. Aren’t you ashamed of yourself?” he suddenly addressed Victor. “And a Komsomol member, I daresay?”

“Y-e-e-s. . . But—”

“Shame on you!” the collier said angrily. “I can understand these fellows! They’re kulaks. Weasels. It runs in their blood. But you!”

“But I. . . I’m not a miner!” Victor cried, almost weeping with shame and despair. “What makes you think that? I. . . I’m here by chance. . . I was visiting a . . . friend. . .” He saw the man did not believe him. He was eyeing Victor suspiciously. Was that the kind of look he was going to get from people for the rest of his life? “I was . . . er . . .

visiting a friend. . . I'm working in town myself. . ." he muttered hastily. "I give you my word! If you like, I'll show you my papers. My word of honour!"

"Why did I give my word of honour?" he thought, angry with himself. "I'm going to the bad altogether!"

But he did so want the stranger in the old greatcoat and the leather cap to believe him!

"Ah!" the latter murmured at length. "That's different. I'm sorry." He smiled faintly and explained: "It breaks your heart to see these goings on. I'd throw them all down the shaft, the tramps! If there's anyone I hate, it's a tramp. Are you coming from the Maria?"

"Er. . . yes. . . From the Maria."

"I don't remember having seen you there."

"I was telling you, I was on a visit. Just a few days." Victor rattled on, overjoyed. "I've got a friend there. Andrei. I live in town myself. D'you imagine I'd do such a thing as to . . . run away?" he said, blushing like a child and annoyed with himself for doing so.

"Yes, of course!" the miner said genially. "Your face looked familiar to me at first. Such things happen!"

Lights appeared upon the road. The railway station was now quite near.

The man in the greatcoat stole a sidelong glance at his companion—Victor did not shrink under it as before, and tried to look him straight in the eyes—then repeated:

"Yes, such things happen! Now I remember—I saw you at the meeting."

"What?" Victor stopped in his tracks, startled.

The man in the greatcoat went close up to him, gripped the lapels of his coat and said in a whisper, breathing right into his face:

"Now you're running away, you swine!"

"And you, what about you?" Victor bristled. "You've got a box, too. You too—"

"I'm going to the army, annual camp!" the miner said, and pushed Victor away from him in disgust.

And Victor was obliged to run away from that man in the greatcoat.

* 14 *

He ran panting into the railway station and went straight to the booking office. He wished he were in the train already! Only to get away from here as quickly as possible! But the booking office was still closed, and at the inquiry office he was told that the train south was due within an hour and the train north some time in the night. "If it isn't late," the girl added indifferently.

He moved away from the window. He had definitely made up his mind to go north. Not south, for an easy life, and not to Chibiryaki to his mother, but north, the farthest north the train would take him. Out there in the Siberian wilds he would win for himself justification and forgiveness.

But the train north was not due until night, if it was not late. Here, at the railway station, someone might see him and recognize him any minute. He would have to meet the miner in the greatcoat again. Every glance people now threw at him and his box was like a spit in the face.

"The train south is due in an hour," he reminded himself.

Perhaps he should go south? To the Caucasus? To the sea? For a minute he felt free and happy. He could go where he liked. He was like a young bird that freely flapped its wings for the first time and felt that they had been given it for flight. He stood there on the platform of that little station in the steppe, and the whole world lay before him. Tomorrow, if he wanted, the warm caressing sea would murmur at his feet. Tomorrow, if he wanted, the mountains would tower around him.

Nevertheless, he would go north, only north. Nobody would throw it into his face that he had run away from the mine for the sake of an easy life.

He would go north, even if the train were a day late!

There was no need, though, to hang about the railway station or on the platform where everyone could see him.

He went out on to the square. It was one of those November evenings in the Donbas, when the sky descends low over the earth, and there is no earth or sky, only a damp misty murk, filled with the disquieting calls of locomotive whistles and human voices; the sounds float in the mist, while the lights stand motionless; and the steppe still smells of dead grass and yesterday's rain—the last smells of autumn.

It is not cold yet, but the air is bracing, and the earth, locked in the first frail autumn frosts, lies spell-bound and expectant, waiting eagerly for the first snow as it waits for the first rain in summer.

On such evenings the sweetest smell in the world is the smell of home and of smoke curling over the chimney. On such evenings the married colliers love to sit at home and drink vodka with their friends. Their wives keep running out to the cold cellar for snacks—pickled cucumbers and salted cabbage; the cucumbers are not quite done yet, and at this rate they never will be.

On such evenings there is not a man in the world who does not think of coal: coal is warmth, and the mere thought of it is heart-warming. A stock of coal has to be put in for the winter, and on such evenings all the telephones and telegraph apparatuses are kept busy with it, with coal.

On such evenings it is pleasant to feel oneself a miner. It is good, after a successful day's work, to go outbye, to take a warm bath in the change-house and to go home through the whole settlement, looking people squarely in

the face. On such evenings one simply must have a house of one's own, a family of one's own and a clean conscience at peace with the world.

But Victor had no home. There he sat on his box outside the railway station. Even the birds had finished their autumn migration, while he was just beginning it. What was in store for him? What would happen to him? He was now a rolling stone.

It grew cold. If he had to sell his coat and jacket, how would he get to his destination? He suddenly felt that he was hungry. A glass of hot tea would be just the thing now. He reminded himself that there was a lunch-shop round the corner, in the public garden. It could easily be located by the noise and songs that issued from that direction. He picked up his box and walked towards it.

Outside the lunch-shop stood a small but merry crowd. Victor wanted to pass by, but stopped involuntarily and listened.

In the centre of the crowd, blue with cold, stood a ragged tramp in miner's boots, tapping out the rhythm of a tune on a pair of wooden spoons, while he danced and reeled off a doggerel; the crowd guffawed and joined in the refrain.

Only snatches of the song reached Victor:

*Holes in his trousers,
And holes in his boots. . .*

the spoon-clicker rattled off.

What followed was so smutty that it was drowned in the laughter and delighted screech of the crowd and immediately varnished over, as it were, with the refrain:

*Heigh, duba-duba, duba, duba!
Duba-duba, duba, heigh!*

Ah, well, it was a diversion of a sort! The train would be a long time coming, even if it wasn't late, and the tea could wait. And Victor mingled with the crowd.

*They work the coal
In a poky hole...*

continued the spoon-clicker, and the crowd roared the refrain:

*Heigh, duba-duba, duba, duba!
Duba-duba, duba, heigh!*

It clapped in time to the music, almost drowning out the clickety-clack of the wooden spoons. The tramp kept on dancing, trying to perform a tap-dance with his ragged boots, as if he would strike a spark out of the frozen ground, and his tatters, his cold-blue lips and cheeks danced with him.

*Toodle-loo Donbas,
Take a last look at us!*

"Go it, boy!" yelled a tramp standing next to Victor, and roared through the refrain in an ecstasy of delight:

*Heigh, duba-duba, duba, duba!
Duba-duba, duba, heigh!*

The spoon-clicker, flushed with success, "went it" further:

*We'll have our fling
With a jolly good swing,
And with no more fuss
We'll quit the Donbas!*

What was this? What was Victor doing here, in this filthy crowd? Among these tramps, this riff-raff, these

wretched offscourings thrown out from the mine like so much dirt defiling its cleanness? He decided to go away at once and even made a movement to do so, but the spoon-clicker caught sight of him—he stood out from the rest of the crowd, still clean and tidy, with the obvious stamp of the Komsomol nucleus upon him—it would take some time to obliterate. The fellow winked to him, moved up closer, and stood right in front of him, his rags dancing on his twitching body.

“Hail to the brotherhood!” he cried to Victor in a snuffling voice. “This one’s specially for you, young man!”

He started a frenzied tattoo on his spoons:

*Autumn’s come, hooray, hooray,
Komsomol miners are flying away. . .*

“Oho-o-o!” the crowd roared with delight.

All eyes were now on Victor. Someone slapped him familiarly on the back. Someone shouted: “Hi, birdie, keep your chin up!” And again loud guffaws burst from hoarse beery throats.

Victor made a dash to get away, but dozens of hands gripped his jacket and his box and would not let him go. “Hi, chappie, where you going? Wait, we’ll have a dance soon!”

“Let me go!” Victor yelled in a strangled voice, beside himself. He struggled so fiercely that they were obliged to release their hold. He pushed his way through the crowd and ran off, pursued by mocking shouts and ribald laughter, the howling, bellowing voice of the pack:

*Heigh, duba-duba, duba, duba!
Duba-duba, duba, heigh!*

He went back to the railway station. Where else could he go? He began to realize that he had made a mistake in running away from the mine, a terrible unpardonable

mistake. He had scuttled his life with his own hand. But return was now impossible. It was too late.

"Is it too late?" he suddenly asked himself. "Nobody knows yet. I can say I went for a stroll." "But the box?" Ah, the box. One doesn't go for a stroll with a box. That meant he would have to tell everything, tell Andrei . . . and Svetlichny . . . everyone. They would laugh. No, worse, they would "surround him with solicitude," the penitent sinner. They would remember that night for a long time—the flight and the homecoming—and chaff him about it. They would keep an eye on him to prevent it happening again.

"No, I can't go back!" he thought gloomily. "It's too late now!" His brows contracted stubbornly—they took after his father's, had the same bold wing-like sweep. But his father had never run away from anyone in his life!

The southward bound train had already left, taking with it the miner in the old greatcoat, no doubt. At any rate, he wasn't to be seen anywhere. Victor went up to the window of the inquiry office again. Yes, the north train was behind time.

"Maybe it will catch up?" Victor said irresolutely.

"Maybe it will," the girl answered without any enthusiasm.

Victor went into the crowded waiting-room, placed his box down on the floor in a corner and sat down on it. The light was bad there, and if he hid his face in the collar of his coat no one would notice him. He did so.

He was very tired both in body and soul. He had not realized until now how dead tired he was. Shutting his eyes, he tried to doze, but a sudden fear assailed him. What was it?

He did not stop to think; he felt like a harried animal, and obeying a terrified instinct, he started up and fled.

He thought he heard someone call him by his name, but he did not look round. Some door or other barred his

path, and he gave it a violent push which set the panes rattling, and dashed out.

He found himself on the platform again, and drew his breath. Someone was following him! He could feel it in his skin. His very back caught the sound of hurried dogging footsteps behind him. He ran off again.

"Victor!" This time the call came distinctly out of the darkness.

He darted across the railway tracks without stopping to look back, and suddenly ran into a goods train. He rushed hither and thither in a panic. What now?

And then a simple happy idea struck him. He did not have to wait for the train going north. This goods train was carrying coal, and it could only be going north. The locomotive was under steam, and the crew was busy around it. Evidently the train would soon pull out. He would have to board it before he was overtaken. By morning he would be far away! The thing was to get away from this accursed station where everyone knew him and was watching him.

He gripped the side of a truck.

"Victor!" he heard the voice again out of the dark.

The voice seemed familiar. Could it be his imagination? Whatever it was, he had to act without delay. He tossed his box into the truck and hoisted himself over the side.

The truck was loaded with coal, and when Victor dropped on to cold wet heaps, he felt for a moment as if he were back in the pit again. The smell of the coal was unforgettable! It flashed across Victor's mind that perhaps these heaps of coal on which he was now lying had been mined by himself. Obviously it was coal from the Steep Maria. Perhaps it was his coal. Would all the coal Victor Abrosimov had hewed in his short mining career suffice to feed the locomotive furnace during the long run north? Hardly!

A tremor ran through all the joints of the train; the box cars and trucks creaked and crunched like bones. "We'll soon start!" Victor thought joyfully. For the first time he felt light and happy.

Someone, puffing and panting, was climbing up the side of the truck in which Victor lay. Victor froze still, pressing his whole body against the coal with bated breath. The man crawled in and flopped down on the coal at his side.

At the same instant the train gave another jolt and began moving. At first slowly, as though groping its way over the rails. Then the wheels started clicking faster and faster. A keen draught whistled over the truck. Victor shivered. It was cold. "If I fall asleep I'll freeze," he thought.

"Victor?" the man next to him said quietly.

Victor started. His first impulse was to seize his box and jump for it! But the train was now moving at full speed, and the telegraph poles rushed past with a flash.

"Victor!" the man next to him said again, and Victor, with horror, recognized the voice.

"Andrei! You?"

* 15 *

At that time in the autumn of nineteen thirty, I was unaware, of course, that the train which was carrying me home to the Donbas from the army, and was behind time, having dropped out of schedule somewhere between Prokhladnaya and Rostov, was being so impatiently waited for at a small station in the steppe by a young man named Victor Abrosimov.

I did not know the boy then. I had never even heard his name. It never entered my mind that he would one day come into my life.

Cursing the train, the engine driver and all the railway authorities in the world, I stood in the vestibule of the carriage—I was tired of sitting in the compartment—waiting eagerly, passionately, lovingly for the coming meeting. Not with friends—they I would not embrace until tomorrow—and not even with my mother, but with the stern and tender friend of my childhood and rollicking youth—the Donbas.

I was born there. There I ate the first piece of bread earned by my own hands. There, to my own surprise, I had written my first verses and fled with them into the steppe, where, sitting on a mound, weeping with pride and joy, I had recited them to myself, while the wind bore the words away.

There for the first time I had kissed a girl. She had auburn hair tinged with gold. We had sat on the mound all night; her lips smelt of wormwood, and our kisses were bitter-sweet and terrifying, and it seemed as if all the stars above the steppe saw us and did not approve!

But the old mound looked graciously upon us and our love. It was gratifying to lie on its couch of scented savoury and wormwood, to hear the goodly earth breathing hotly and languorously, and, intoxicated with the perfume of the grasses, the earth and the wind, to talk endlessly about our love and the future. That night everything seemed possible and near, even the stars in the sky.

We had sat there till daybreak, until the whistle of the Steep Maria, breaking the silence of the steppe, brought us down to earth with a shock, reminding us that besides kisses there was life, and work, and the time-keeper's board at the check-gate. Holding hands, we had run down the mound and parted outside the settlement, embarrassed and happy, not daring to look each other in the eyes.

Now that girl has forgotten me—no wonder her lips had tasted of bitter wormwood. I heard that she married another man or was going to marry him. I was unlikely to meet her now.

But then I could climb to the top of that mound again. From there my native land would unfold to me and greet me with all its smoke-stacks. Loyai old friend! It was like a mother—it would never foresake you or deceive you.

And so it was with anxious expectancy that I looked forward to our meeting, as I would with my mother. What was it like? Had it changed? Grown older?

Why, no! It had grown younger, people said. All the letters from home, which I received in the regiment, began and ended with the phrase: "You would not recognize the Donbas now!"

"Come home quick, Sergei!" a friend of mine wrote to me. "You won't recognize the Donbas. You can't imagine what's been started here. A revolution, old chap, a great revolution in the Donbas. Its pick days are coming to an end. Pneumatic hammers have appeared at the high-dip seams—you've got to see them to realize what it means—and new cutting machines at the flat seams. The horse-putters' days have gone; soon nothing will remain of them but a song. Electric traction motors will now work on haulage. The new machinery will require new men. You must come and see it with your own eyes, Sergei."

I had read and re-read those letters, which had sounded like music to me. Even when my friend wrote about the difficulties—and he wrote a good deal about them without mincing words—about the food shortage, about wreckers and drifters, about dullards who ought to have been kicked out long ago—even those angry lines were like music to me, the music of battle.

"Yes," I had thought with envy, "that's where people really live, that's where life is interesting."

Mother wrote me, too, that I wouldn't know the Donbas now. It was odd to read those lines in her dear, familiar letters, usually filled with quiet family news and regards from relatives. But it appears that my mother, as she herself admitted embarrassedly in her last letter, was now an "active social worker."

"Our womenfolk," she wrote, "have started to tackle the settlement. And I, old fool, have hitched on to them! So now I'm a social worker—don't laugh! Such big things are being started here, son, you'd be surprised!" she wrote, almost apologetically. "One just can't lag behind other folks these days. They're building cottages for the miners now,"—she had used the foreign word "cottages," and not houses, barracks or hostels; apparently that word now passed current among the miners. "Such neat little cottages. For two families. And a separate kitchen. And even a bath-room."

So there was even a bath-room.

I recalled our old mining settlements—the Dogtowns, the Shanghais, and Kopai-gorods. The mud-huts with wet pillows in the paneless window frames. The ramshackle "cabins," more cramped than the working face, and just as damp, dark and dirty. And the colliers' barracks with plank bunks in three tiers. The old squalid Donbas! People here were born to get into pit harness as quickly as possible, and lived until they dropped in the traces. They slept where they could, ate what was thrown in their way, and chancing to fall in love, set up family to give birth to new drudges. Dogtown was a hideous name, but still more hideous was the life it had stood for! The miners had put an end to that dog's life thirteen years before, and now the end of Dogtown, too, had come.

And at such a time I was away from the Donbas!

But there was another piece of news, apparently the most important and precious, which Mother kept for the end.

"And on Main Street, Sergei," she wrote—and I could feel how her hand shook, "we have laid out flower beds. Real roses will grow there now—we planted them ourselves."

Roses in a mining settlement! My mother had always loved roses—I remember that since I was a child. She would save five kopeks out of the housekeeping money to buy them at the market place on Sunday, and would bring them home shyly. The roses were big, like burdock leaves, and a brilliant scarlet, and they lived for a very long time. They gathered dust all the winter over the looking glass in the corner and over the photographs on the wall. They never died, because they had never been alive. They were paper ones. I had never seen any other roses as a child and fondly believed all roses were like these—cold, rough and inodorous. I did not like them.

No, there had been no flowers in our childhood. No flowers, no greenery, no river. Nothing but the bitter wormwood steppe, and the barrows, and the bald rusty clay hills.

There is a mining settlement in the Donbas called Bald Hill. I went there once, only once, and only for two hours, but I shall remember it as long as I live.

It was a hot Sunday noon, when steppe and sky are dry and sweltering and the air motionless, when the sun blazes relentlessly and man finds no place for himself upon earth. On such days the miners stay underground, preferring the cool pit to the surface.

There was not a single tree on that bare bald hill, not a shrub, nor grass, nor weeds. Nothing but brown-red clay underfoot, stamped hard by human feet, cracked with the heat; the cracks in it looked like bleeding gashes.

Scattered about on the hill-top here and there stood long grey barracks. There were no fences or gardens round them, no wood sheds, or other signs of human

habitation and domestic comfort. It was as if people only slept here, and hurried away as soon as they woke up.

Even the latrines here did not hide shyly behind the houses, but stood exposed on the open road. Their doors were wide open and poured a hot suffocating stench over the whole mining settlement.

Yes, that Bald Hill was a ghastly place! I walked through the whole settlement and was descending the hill when I suddenly saw a patch of water. It was not a river, nor a lake, nor a pond. It was simply a very big puddle or a ditch filled apparently with pit water, and people were lying in it—adults and children. They were not swimming—there was no room for that here—or bathing, or just washing; they simply lay there in the water, revelling quietly in the coolness.

Thinking today of Bald Hill, I understand that had I been born there I would have loved it as I now love the Steep Maria, and held it to be the dearest spot on earth. It is not for the roses that one loves one's birth-place.

It is said that to love is to put up with everything, to accept and forgive.

But our love, the love of Soviet people, is a strange restless feeling. We love our land and yet refuse to put up with either the Dogtowns, or the Bald Hills.

We love our country with the faithful exacting love of a son. Every smile of hers is joy, every wrinkle sorrow. We will allow no one to insult her, but we ourselves weep bitterly over each of her flaws. And then, spitting on our hands, we take up our tool—and the flaw is gone!

We want her to be eternally young and beautiful, for ever blooming, fresh and pure. We want her to be the finest country in the world, the most powerful and the happiest. It is something worth working for, and living for, and even dying for without a sigh.

I was overcome by a sudden strong desire to be in the Donbas now, immediately, to see with my own eyes how the roses were blooming on Bald Hill, how the Dogtowns were disappearing and new towns springing up, and the coal-cutting machine entering the mine as lord and master.

Those letters settled my agonizing doubts as to what to do with myself. Now I knew.

That very evening I went to the regimental commander.

"Ah!" he greeted me, as usual, with a tinge of amusement. "Well, what can you say?"

I told him that I had received a letter from home.

"I see," he frowned. "Mother's ill, I suppose? You'd better go then!"

He thought I had found an excuse for leaving the army.

I laughed.

"No, Mother's quite well. She's planting roses."

And I told him the news I had received from the Donbas.

His face lit up. He began asking questions. Keenly interested, he fairly swamped me with questions. "Did you see those machines? Are they the real thing?"

"Yes," he said after a pause, and smiled his warm genial smile. "Well, well, go home! Write a good book about the Donbas, and we'll read it."

"I have no intention of writing a book, Pavel Filipovich."

He looked at me in surprise.

"Then what are you going to do in the Donbas?"

"I don't know," I said airily. "Perhaps I'll go to work in the mine."

"What for?"

"What d'you mean?"

"Are you a mining engineer?"

"No."

"A technician, a mechanic?"

"N-n-o. But that doesn't matter. I'll just work in the mine."

He bit his lip in silence—a sign that he was angry. Then, without looking at me, he said:

"Y-e-s. I see your army training has given you nothing. Nothing!"

I was taken aback.

"What d'you mean, Pavel Filippovich?"

"We taught you for a whole year," he barked fiercely, "and you've learned nothing! You don't know what co-operation is, you're not weapon-minded. That's bad! One doesn't bring aircraft down with howitzers, one doesn't try to smash pill-boxes with a pistol, and one doesn't attack tanks with sabres in mounted formation. Don't you know that?"

"I do."

"And what are you?" he demanded sternly. "What class of weapon? Are you a howitzer, a pistol, or a sabre? That's the point," he said, cooling off at once, as he always did. "First make sure what class of weapon you are, and then use it. Use it strictly! Is that clear?"

I was soon to recollect that conversation.

We were lined up for the last time on the parade ground fronting the regimental school. We were taking leave of the regimental colours, of our commanders and army mates, of Height 537.5 looming blue behind the barracks, of our gay army youth, which would never return again!

We marched through Akhalsikh for the last time in a column four abreast, and the people on the pavements greeted us with friendly shouts:

"Shvidobit, shvidobit, comrades! Good-bye!"

The girls waved handkerchiefs. . . . How many wounded hearts we were leaving behind in this little garden town on the frontier!

And now the train was rushing us along the banks of the swift Kura; there was a tang of river and forest in the air, the smell of camp-fires on the bank and of warm sheep's cheese; the heavy branches of the cypress trees beat against the car windows; the mountains were aflame with the tints of autumn, and the bare slim trunks of young oaks stood out like tender wisps of smoke amid the autumnal riot of colour; there is nothing more gorgeous and luxuriant in the world than Georgia in the autumn. But I was leaving this pungent splendour for the bare hills of the Donbas, and I was not sorry.

The train rushed us—hundreds of discharges—through the Caucasus, the Kuban and the Don, each towards his destiny. Each had his plans, hopes and dreams. Sometimes we discussed them and argued ourselves hoarse. Each was twenty-two, and for us everything was possible and attainable; no dream was too daring or fantastic.

But to none of us was it given to glimpse the future and trace the pattern of his life, although each one had it in him—in his hands, in his cropped head, in his heart, whether it was a warm or cold one.

At the big stations and sometimes at the small way-side stops our carriages were attacked by eloquent men in raincoats and high-boots, with brief-cases under their arms. The more enterprising got into our carriage and travelled with us to the next big station.

They were recruiting agents. In those memorable days of 1930 they were to be met everywhere. In torrid Salsk they would lure young boys with the charms of Siberia and Kolyma, and in the stanitsa Nevinomisskaya they sought volunteers for Magnitnaya and Dnieprostroy. They needed men of all qualifications, and men without any

qualifications; they swore that at their construction job a man would be taught a splendid trade in less than three weeks. Men, men—men were the most precious capital in those days of great country-wide construction, and the recruiting agents sought them eagerly everywhere, like seekers after gold.

This train of boys discharged from the army was a "lucky strike" to them. They devoured the strong, healthy capable lads with hungry eyes. Among those army tunics one could find skilled workmen of every trade.

We knew that ourselves. We laughingly told ourselves that if a sudden squall were to cast our carriage up somewhere on a desert island, we would feel quite at home even there. We had among us mechanics and farmers, animal husbandrymen and bakers, builders and leather-dressers, metal-workers and masons, and even a dentist—Volkov-the-second.

The recruiting agent, getting into our carriage, would usually start the conversation with an innocent question:

"You going far, boys?"

"To Moscow!" the whole car would answer in a chorus, although barely a third were really going there.

"Is that so?" the recruiting agent would say, narrowing his eyes mockingly. "What will you do there?" Then, after a slight pause, he would come out with the solemn utterance: "Have you boys ever heard about Khibinogori? You haven't? Well then, listen!"

And he began telling them about Khibini.

By Jove, they were poets, those red-faced weather-beaten snarers of souls in rusty-looking raincoats! What breath-taking pictures they unfolded to us! Very often one or another of the hundred boys in our car would succumb to the tempter and sign a contract there and then.

I came in for my share of attacks too.

"Excuse me, young man, but you don't happen to be a

heat technician, do you?" the agent would say, taking a seat beside me.

"No, I'm not."

"That's a pity. That profession's in short supply. But never mind! Maybe you're a mechanic, assembler, electrician?"

"No."

"An accountant, perhaps, a planner, book-keeper? We need book-keepers badly."

"No, I'm not a book-keeper."

"I have it now—you're a physical culture instructor! I guessed at once. I've been looking out for an instructor for our sportsground, you know. Well, call it a go?"

But I wasn't a physical culture instructor, nor even a decent sportsman. The agent's eloquence was wasted on me. I wasn't a coker, a copper-smith, a teacher, an agriculturist—"we need agriculturists badly!" the recruiting agent assured me earnestly, "we want to raise vegetables in the polar regions!"—nor a wireless operator, or a soapboiler. I wasn't anything. The regimental commander's words then came back to me: "What class of weapon are you?"

"Then perhaps you'll agree to study?" the recruiting agent still kept on at me. "We have courses, a technical school, an educational block. A good allowance, a hostel."

To study? To study what—what trade, what class of weapon?

Again I thought of the regimental commander's words: "Then what are you going to do in the Donbas?" Indeed, what? Reading the letters from home, I wanted but one thing—to be there and to see. To see the revolution in the Donbas with my own eyes.

But a strong lad of twenty-two can't just go about looking at things and admiring other people's work. He

has to work himself. But where? In what capacity? Just go and work in the pit?

The nearer we drew to the Donbas, the more these thoughts worried me. "Oh, we'll see!" I tried to dismiss them, but they were not to be dismissed.

Somewhere in the Rostov region a new man came into our carriage. He did not look at all like a recruiting agent—he was too stout, for one thing. All the agents we had seen were lean, restless, active men, who, like wolves, depended on their legs for a living.

This man was slow-moving and stout. He plumped down on the seat beside me as soon as he came into the carriage, took off his white peaked cap and began mopping his bald head, puffing and wheezing. Then he unbuttoned his raincoat, jacket and the collar of his embroidered Ukrainian shirt, wiped his massive neck with a handkerchief and murmured:

"Whew, isn't it hot!" although outside the window was autumn and rain.

We fell into conversation. He turned out to be the manager of a state farm. "There's my farm. A real giant!" he pointed it out to us through the window not without pride. He was now travelling to the regional centre on business.

"Something told me you boys were from the army," he said, blowing up his wheat-coloured moustaches. "So I just dropped in on the off-chance, you know. Thought maybe I'd find some vet assistant knocking about. Eh?" And he took us all in with his cunning little eyes.

One could well imagine him dropping in on the "off-chance" at some warehouse or railway depot, prying round the place with his sharp thrifty eyes, looking for something that was "knocking about" in the shape of a motor or drive gear, or perhaps a drum with precious engine fuel, then grabbing it like grim death and hauling it off to his farm.

"You're not a vet assistant by any chance, are you?" he pounced directly on me.

"No."

"What will you be?"

That maddening question! How many more times was I to hear it! How could I tell him what I was when I didn't know myself?

"He's a writer!" Pasha Zhikharev suddenly announced with a laugh. So far the boys had not given me away.

"You don't say so!" the manager cried in surprise and eyed me as if he couldn't believe it. "Is it true?"

"It is..." several voices cried at once. I was thrown into confusion.

"My dear chap!" the manager cried, strangely agitated. He jumped up and gripped my shoulders, as if he were afraid I would run away or some other farm manager would steal me from under his nose. "Why, bless me, my dear chap... I've been looking for you these three months... Is he really a writer?" he turned a narrowed suspicious eye on the boys, still gripping me fast.

"Oh, I'm no writer! What can I do at your place?"

"What d'you mean? I like that! You can run our newspaper. They've given us one after all! I've got the machine and the type, and found a compositor in Rostov, but as for an editor... I have one of a sort, nothing much to speak of... but he isn't a writer! Look here, my dear chap, what about coming down to our place to work? Why, I'll feed you on milk and butter! Ours is a rich farm!"

"What do you want a newspaper for?"

"What d'you mean?" His voice sounded hurt. "This is a civilized country, thank God! The newspaper with us is a tremendous force! It tells people about the foremost farmers and pulls up the laggards. I may be just a peasant, a steppe man, but I understand a thing or two. The press is a tremendous thing! Well, what do you say?"

"No. I'm going home to the Donbas."

The farm manager and I parted company at Rostov. He kept saying how sorry he was I couldn't come with him to the state farm, and invited me down for the summer—"to grass." I promised to come.

It was already night. The train was far behind time. I went out into the vestibule to have a smoke. The quiet steppe rolled past the dark window.

In an hour or two I would see the Donbas. Before seeing it I would hear it, scent it, like a horse scents the home smell of the stable a mile off; I could almost smell the smouldering coal, but that was probably from the engine furnace.

Tomorrow I would be at the mine.

No, I was not a howitzer, I realized, nor a mortar, nor a tank; perhaps I would never succeed in shooting a real big book on the world. But what was to prevent me from mastering the light quick-firing machine-gun of a journalist? Say what you like, but a machine-gun was a jolly good weapon!

I could sling it over my shoulder and range our whole vast land with it. I would see everything! Everything a man with eager life-loving eyes could wish to see: the first pneumatic hammer eating into the coal face with a clitter-clatter, and the last horse-putter, throwing his old and now useless whip among the pit-waste with a wild parting whistle.

* 16 *

"So it's you, Andrei?" Victor said bleakly. "What you doing here?"

He recollected how, only two months ago, the jolly trainload of Komsomol boys had rolled along this very track. They had been greeted at every station with flowers and music; girls in white dresses had sent them

smiles, and—when the train started moving—sometimes kisses. He and Andrei had stood by the window with their arms about each other, watching the unfolding panorama of the Donbas, one minute all ablaze, the next dimmed by a film of blue smoke; and they had dreamt of a grand and glorious life here; and believed it would be so! Why shouldn't it? They were volunteers then, heroes.

"We came back from the meeting..." Andrei explained disjointedly, "and you weren't there. The boys said, 'Maybe he's gone out for a stroll'... But Svetlichny—"

"What did Svetlichny say?" Victor asked in a flat voice.

"Oh, nothing much. He only said he doubted it. I took a look under the bed, and your box wasn't there. So I guessed. I got such a fright, Victor! How could he, I thought. Now I'll be all alone!"

So here they were. The same track, the same rails, and Andrei beside him again. And the same flaming sky and curling smoke beyond the ravine, and wet flakes of vapour settling on face and shoulders. And under one's belly the prodding coal, as if Victor and Andrei were lying on a screener instead of in a railway truck, and the iron belt was shaking and tossing them like coal dirt, ejecting them ruthlessly from the mine, from the Donbas, from life....

"What made you do it, Victor?" Andrei said with mild reproach.

It was on the tip of Victor's tongue to shout out angrily "And what made *you* do it?" but he dropped his head on the cold coal, which was already covered with hoarfrost, and muttered through his clenched teeth:

"What swine we are ... what swine!"—as if the depth to which he had fallen had only just dawned on him. Meanwhile the telegraph poles, wires and lamps at the switches flashed past, and each milepost was like an aspen stake driven into his heart.

Victor sprang to his feet impetuously and seized his box. The train was slowing down at the approaches to a station.

"Come on!" Victor shouted savagely to his friend. "Jump!" And without a word more he leapt into the dark. Andrei followed suit.

They dropped on to the soft moist gravel. The train crawled past them. The tail light winked and melted into the mist.

"Are you all right?" Victor asked.

"I think so," Andrei answered, going up to his friend.

"Come along then!" Victor commanded, rising to his feet. He did not say where to and Andrei did not ask. It was clear enough; there was only one way for them—back to the Steep Maria.

"Where's your box?" Victor asked. "You don't say you've left it in the truck, you silly ass!"

"I . . . er . . . I didn't have anything with me. . ." Andrei stammeringly confessed. "My things are there . . . in the hostel."

Victor looked closely at his friend. He felt a sudden desire to go up to him and embrace him, but he did not, he could not. He gave his head a shake and said in a smothered voice:

"Come along!"

And they started off.

They did not know there was a straight road to the Steep Maria through the steppe from the station where they had jumped the train, and so they went back over the railway track.

They walked in silence. Their footsteps rang hollow in the silence of the night.

Suddenly Andrei gave a joyous laugh.

"I knew it, I knew it!" he cried exultantly. "I knew you wouldn't do it. You're not that kind, are you, Victor?"

Victor did not answer.

But Andrei was unable to walk in silence. He wanted to talk, talk, laugh and sing. He had been through so much that night! More than he had ever been through in all his life.

When he discovered that Victor's box was missing from under the bed, and the truth forced itself upon him that his friend had run away from the mine—as if he were not Victor, the pride of his heart, but some cad of a Bratchenko—when he realized he had lost his friend and was left alone, all alone, he felt so miserable, so utterly miserable that he could have cried like a baby.

Beside himself, he had rushed out of the hostel and made straight for the railway station. He decided to find his friend, stop him, persuade him, beg him to go back. He did not for a moment doubt that Victor would come back.

The only thing he feared was that he would not find Victor at the station, that he would be too late. He had been so overjoyed at seeing his friend in the corner of the waiting-room that he involuntarily cried out and waked him. Afterwards he had run after him on to the platform and farther to the goods train. He knew now that he would catch Victor.

"Look here!" he said suddenly. "If we come at day-break no one will ever know anything about it, you needn't worry!" He knew that this was just what Victor was brooding about all the time.

"No!" Victor said with a toss of his head. "I'll tell Svetlichny everything myself."

"Will you?" Andrei muttered, astonished. "Oh, all right! And if anyone tries to be funny about it I'll punch his jaw."

"I don't care if they do."

"Let 'em just try it!" Andrei growled with an ominous look.

The friends walked on for a while in silence.

"Let me carry the box a bit, Vitya," Andrei said.

"No, that's all right."

"I don't mind. Let me carry it."

But Victor did not answer, and they walked on again in silence.

"D'you remember the Psyol, Vitya?" Andrei said with a low laugh. "There's a river for you! Nothing like it here."

"Uhu."

"Must be frozen by now."

"No, not yet."

"It'll freeze soon, though. Not feeling cold, Vitya? If you like—"

"No, I'm all right."

"I just thought about the Psyol and it makes you feel good. D'you remember Frosya Vovk from the Seventh A? She was a splendid skater!"

"Yes."

"Beat all the other girls hollow. She always preferred skating with you. What about us writing her a letter, eh?"

"What for?"

"Well, just like that! We're keeping well and think of you. . . Miner greetings, yours truly Victor and Andrei. What?"

"A fat lot she cares about your miner greetings!"

"Why not? I'm sure she'd be pleased."

"She always thought I'd be an airman," Victor said with a grin. "I kissed her once, you know."

"Go on! I didn't know that."

"Yes, in a boat. Don't remember how it happened—sort of accidental. And then we went away, came here."

"Well, what if we have become miners?" Andrei said warmly. "Is it a disgrace to be a miner, or what?"

"I'm not saying it is."

"Maybe a miner's job means more to people than an airman's!" Andrei went on agitatedly. "A miner digs the

sun out of the earth. If you want to know, coal is human sun, my dear chap—it gives light, and warmth, and power.”

“Y-e-e-s,” Victor muttered with a wry smile, absorbed in his own thoughts. “I didn’t become a flyer, but I came pretty near to flying the mine.”

“Forget about it!” Andrei cried imploringly, stopping in his tracks. “I ask you as a pal, please forget about it!”

“How can I, Andrei?” Victor said simply and sadly.

“Just chuck it out of your head! Take my word, Vitya, you’ll make such a go of it at the mine now! Now, don’t argue,” he hurried on, fearing that his friend would interrupt him. “D’you know, the moment I saw that pneumatic hammer, I thought of you straightaway, really I did. It’s a marvellous machine. Just the thing for you. It wants a smart man to handle it. A young, intelligent chap. Someone with plenty of go in him. Now, hold on! Listen to me. There isn’t a man yet at the Steep Maria who’s started using the pneumatic hammer. No one has the faintest idea about it, except Uncle Prokop. You’ll be the first, Vitya! You’ll show ’em what’s what!”

“Give me more details about it,” Victor said quietly.

“Certainly!” Andrei cried, delighted. “It’s like a . . . a machine-gun—you’ll like it. It leaves the pick just nowhere! Jiggles in your hands like a live thing. That’s on account of the compressed air inside it. . . .”

And he gave his friend a hurried, breathless account of the pneumatic hammer.

It was day-break by the time they came to the Steep Maria. They stopped on the hill-side to rest and looked down at the colliery. They could hardly recognize it.

The hoarfrost, which had settled overnight, had wrought a magic transformation. A light, fluttering bridal veil seemed to have been thrown over the settlement,

giving it a festive air. Hoarfrost lay upon the trees, upon the roofs, the chimneys and the waste dump. The old dump looked like a snow-capped Mt. Elbrus.

The young sun was rising from behind the head-frame, and its beams raced merrily across the earth, working magic in their path. The shaft-house blazed up, the windows of the lamp cabin splashed off a shower of coloured sparks, and the hoarfrost turned pink and creamy on the roofs and purple on the waste dump.

Where the sun's scouts had not yet penetrated, everything lay wrapped in blue mist. There the shades of night still fought their wavering battle with day, falling back to the ravines and gullies and rising up in curling mists.

The settlement, however, was already waking to life. The roosters crowed, shutters were thrown open with a clatter, and the first wisps of smoke wreathing over the cottage chimneys were shot with gay rosy tints. The iron rooster of the colliery—the whistle of the Steep Maria—woke up with a start and announced the dawn of day with a shrill blast that went rolling over the steppe.

The boys stood on the hill-top, gazing down with rapture at the roseate colliery—they had never imagined it could be so beautiful.

Best of all was the head-frame. At that enchanted hour which transfigured the world, it remained itself, proud of its iron beauty and needing no borrowed tints to enhance it. Its tracery stood clearly etched against the flaming sky; its pulleys revolved confidently in the towering heights and the steel ropes ran industriously up and down, up and down, without a moment's peace or rest. The head-frame was beautiful with that wise simplicity of human device unequalled by anything in Nature.

"Look!" Victor whispered excitedly. "You just look at the head-frame!"

Now Andrei saw what had so greatly excited his friend: at the very top of the head-frame there burned a

small red star. That meant the mine had at last fulfilled its daily plan.

"And we run away!" The words burst from Andrei despite himself.

"The first and last time," Victor said grimly. "We shall never run away again, d'you hear, Andrei?"

"Yes, Vitya."

"Never!" Victor repeated. "We shan't just come back to the mine disgraced. This is what we'll do. You and I will sign up to work in the mine till the end of the five-year plan. D'you hear, Andrei? And we'll challenge all the boys to follow our example. No more running away. Never!" Victor repeated, looking at the colliery, and his words sounded like a solemn oath.

* 17 *

Day was breaking when our train arrived at last in the Donbas. I said good-bye to my army mates and hurriedly jumped off the car. I was home now.

A keen cutting wind struck my face. I smiled: "Is this how you welcome your son home, Donbas?"

However, this cold, truly Donets steppe wind had in it the warm long-familiar odours of burnt coal, factory smoke and life; even in the fiercest frosts those smells warm the soul, if not the body.

I slung my kit-bag over my shoulder and set off for the Steep Maria.

I know, many people think the Donets steppe a bleak and squalid place, especially at this time, in the autumn, when the wormwood is shrivelled and the earth frost-bound. But to me there is nothing more beautiful than this steppe, even in the autumn. Not only because I was born there, but because I know such of its charms as you will find nowhere else in the world.

There is no denying the wistful charm of a quiet rustic landscape—a slow little stream, beyond it a golden wheat field, a little wood, and the bellry ringing out the curfew at eventide. There is something sweet and peaceful about such a rural scene. It is good to lie in the sand by the water and watch the river gliding past its timeless banks. You feel light and happy. Your thoughts are tinged with a sweet melancholy, and your heart is not troubled by yearnings for other places. Why should it be? Everything around you is so familiar—that wheat field stretching to the horizon, and beyond it more fields, a quiet little wood, a small village nestling on the slope of the ravine or over this same little stream.

I prefer always the perturbing landscape of the Donbas; it seems to have been specially made for the dreamer.

There was I, standing on a road running through the steppe, and all around me, as far as the eye can see, the tide of life surges and roars. The whole steppe is peopled. All its hill-sides, gullies and banks are throbbing with eager, unfamiliar, unknown life. What is that smoking across the hill in the west? It looks like a many-funnelled ship. A factory? What factory? How did it spring up? And there, in the east, what are those blue hills, those new head-frames? What sort of people live there, whence did they come, what were they doing? Did they suffer, did they dream, did they love? And there, in the south, how prettily that new little town of dazzling white stone runs up the hill-side. But hold! I recognize this place. Why, it is Stenka Hamlet! Since when has it become a town?

Every step here brings joyous discoveries and revelations. Every wisp of smoke on the horizon is a fresh riddle, a new mystery. And one feels like walking on and on through that steppe, entering its numerous towns and settlements, stopping strangers on the road to ask them eager questions. For there is nothing more interesting or more beautiful in this world than man.

Man! Men's hands created this Donets landscape, and that is why it is so dear to my heart. Nature has been unfair to the land of my birth, she has not given it flowing rivers, or green forests, or sweet grasses. But man refused to reconcile himself to Nature's meagre gifts. He became a god in his own right, and created for himself in the steppe woods, and rivers and hills. That is why people in the Donbas speak of "plantations" instead of "woods," of "reservoirs" instead of "lakes." Even the biggest and most beautiful forest here—the Veliko-Anadole—has been planted by human hands.

Those blue hills on the horizon were created neither by God nor by a geological upheaval. They have been thrown out on to the surface and piled up into pyramids by man, spade by spade. That glow over the steppe is neither lightning nor sun; it is man smelting iron in blast-furnaces and taking half the sky in his stride. And what is that fantastic, eerie blue light quivering in the distance? How beautiful it is! No, it is no star dropping athwart the sky, but man, an electric welder, working on a new construction. And there—look, look!—what is that iridescent arch flung across the sky? No, it is not a rainbow, nor the tail of a gleaming comet, nor the Aurora Borealis. It is a white-hot coke cake, coming out of the oven, and irradiating all the colours of the spectrum as it breaks on the coking wharf. A most beautiful and fantastic sight!

The whole steppe is alive with man's work. It is girdled with electric lights; the whole sky above it is wreathed in wisps of factory vapour, and delicate bluish smoke rises from hundreds of smoke-stacks built by human hands.

No, it is not of grass or sweet clover that the Donets steppe smells, but of strong human sweat. The good smell of human toil! Glory, glory to Man of Labour, to his clever mighty hands, his indomitable heart!

Deeply moved, I approached the Steep Maria. One last hill-side and beyond it the settlement.

On top of the hill, with their backs to me, stood two young men, looking down at the colliery.

"Good morning," I said, drawing level with them and stopping.

They looked at me askance and answered with an ill grace:

"Good morning."

"Going to the Maria?"

"Y-e-e-s..." one of them said after a perceptible pause.

I noticed he was carrying a box.

"Come to work in the mine?" I said.

"N-n-o... We live here."

I glanced at the box in surprise, then again at the boys. I thought they looked uncomfortable. It was awkward to ask questions, although my interest was piqued.

"Then we're going the same way!" I said cheerfully.

They hesitated, then the one with the box said with an air of decision:

"Come along!"

And we strode off side by side.

Book Two



THE STEEP MARIA



* 1 *

THAT was how we got acquainted—the boys from the Steep Maria and I. Meeting by accident on the hill overlooking the colliery one early morning in November 1930, we walked together into the settlement, and one of the boys—the one who was carrying the box (his name was Victor)—yielding to a sudden impulse, told me the story of his flight and return.

He withheld nothing and did not spare his own feelings. He was evidently eager to get it all off his chest, to do public penance and clear his conscience. The only thing he feared was that I would laugh at him; while telling me the story, he kept glancing at me with a look that was now suspicious, now almost hostile, now childishly imploring; I remember his eyes—they were black and bold, with a yellowish gleam in their pupils.

“And now,” he said with a toss of his head. “my friend and I have made up our minds never to leave the pit!”

He looked at me challengingly, as much as to say: "Well, don't you believe me?"

I believed him. And I said as much. They gave me a grateful look.

We parted at the colliery. I wished the boys "soft coal and a strong roof"—the usual miner's good wishes—shook hands with them and went my way.

We did not meet again.

I spent a few days at the Steep Maria, then at other collieries and finally left for Moscow.

There I found what I had been seeking: I became a journalist, correspondent of one of the great dailies.

The editor had no difficulty in persuading me to take long trips; all he had to do was lead me up to the big map hanging on the wall and stick his pencil at random on any point.

"Well, Bazhanov?" he would say, laughing. "Isn't this interesting?"

I should say it was! The 'thirties were starting, those years of Great Construction, of marvellous deeds and amazing doers. A reporter's notes became a page of history. At first my itineraries were confined to the Donbas and the South, but afterwards I felt drawn towards the North. The Urals were said to be the blood brother of the Donbas. And I had to know my relatives.

And so I got to know and love the rocky scarps of the Urals, the bald tussock hills of Siberia, and the woodless rolling hills of the Far East. I became intimate with the Ural master-workmen and Kuznetsk metallists; I saw how coal, salt, ore, potassium, bauxites and gold were mined; how steel was founded and tubes drawn; how in Zlatoust, cavalry sword blades were forged, and, in Kasli, old men cast iron statuettes of antlered deer poised on a steep crag or Don Quixote on a raw-boned cast-iron horse.

The "spurt" nights at Magnitnaya, the "all-hands' work" at the Coking and Chemical plant, and the battles

which the "battalions of enthusiasts" waged with the eternally frozen ground have become abiding memories. Those were days not only of the Great Sowing but of the First Harvest. The fight against time became a winning fight. People began to reap the first fruits of their endeavours. Dreams became reality, designs substance, and blue-prints a living town in yesterday's desert.

The starting of every new industrial unit became a public festival, like the birth of a new child in the great family of the people; we journalists stood there as witnesses, side by side with the parents—the engineers and workmen—while the whole country, seized with the ardour of construction, waited eagerly for our news.

I had the good fortune to be present at many such "christenings." I saw the concrete hardening on the great Dnieper dam, the scaffolding being removed from the new buildings in Komsomolsk-on-Amur, the first bloom rolling off the mill in Makeyevka, the first motor car rolling along the road from Magadan, and the first trams of blue sylvinite drawn to the surface from the Solikamsk mine. I remember the first wisp of smoke over the first blast-furnace in Magnitnaya; it was no longer pinkish, as in the drying days, but pale-yellow—the real work smoke, giving off a smell of ore and coke. Hundreds of people watched it spreading across the sky over Magnitnaya hill; they stood looking in silence, for no words could express their feelings. Words failed me, too.

More often than not the editor would send me on distant journeys not for the sake of some new blast-furnace but for the sake of the birth of some new hero. I found the man somewhere at the bottom of a foundation pit, or on a dam (coated with flakes of concrete from his rubber waders to the crown of his canvas hat), or by the furnace. I wrote about him. And there, all around my hero, on my way to him and from him—at the aerial cross-roads, in the new hotels whose walls were yet unplas-

tered, on a waste plot, in a freight car serving as a temporary railway station on a new line, in the hostels of the locomotive crews or in clay-built barracks—everywhere I met hundreds of other amazing heroes whom my editor had not pointed out to me; their names were still unknown, but I wanted to write about them all. I met no uninteresting people. He who works always has something interesting to tell you.

It seems to me that it was precisely in those years, the 'thirties, that the character of the new man—the Soviet man, the builder of socialism—began to stand out.

All that was noblest in the Russian character blossomed forth richly and lavishly, and all that was alien to it—the dross of the slavish past with its soul-killing drudgery and ignorance—began to peel off and fall away, like scabs from a healthy body. New, Soviet, feelings were born, first among them the feeling of a free master.

The whole country seemed to have become a single big house, a common home, spacious, sunny and joyous, although not yet completed, poignantly dear, as only one's own home can be. The thing now was to finish it, tidy it up and make it comfortable to live in, and for that purpose no effort was to be spared, no sacrifice was too big. Those were difficult years, and viewed from outside, it seemed impossible, inconceivable that any human being could cope with such an immense task in so short a time as was laid down for it.

The Soviet man, however, proved to be a good hand at miracles. "I can do anything!" he proudly declared to the world. "I can do what no other man in the world can do!" And Gromov flew farther and Kokkinaki higher than any other man before them; Yevdokimov made a parachute jump from an incredible height; Turkmenian horsemen galloped to Moscow from Ashkhabad, and motor cars set out from Moscow for the Kara Kum desert.

What did this mean? Foreigners stared agape at the

miracle-birth of a new world and a new man. What was it? Some explained it away with a bewildered shrug—the unfathomable Slav soul! Others, more cunning, put it down to Russian dare-devilry, a sheer spirit of bravado. It did not occur to all those prophets that the gifted people-master was only beginning to show his tremendous latent powers; that the slumbering forces of the giant were only beginning to stir; that the living spring-head of the people's talents had only just been touched off and its flow was never-ending, and if there was any brighter future in store for mankind, it had dawned here, in this country.

That future had its enemies, old and new, big and small. I remember the terrible January night at the Zuevsk power station—the night of the accident. We ran into the generating room and saw ice on the dead body of the burnt motor—a deliberate act of sabotage. I remember a foreigner coming into the room. He was a tall lean man. I do not remember all the details of his supercilious face, but I remember the pliers. He was holding them in his hands and clicking them from time to time.

“Oh, we shall not be able to start the station for a long time!” he said, shaking his head sadly, while the pliers in his hand clicked merrily.

This was the first time I had seen the enemy with pliers in his hand. I had seen other enemies before—the kulak with the sawn-off shotgun under his arm, later the enemy with his tommy-gun atilt, the enemy with a fountain pen and a camera slung across his shoulder, and the enemy in an immaculate diplomatic dress coat. Yes, many enemies howled and raved around our construction sites, and they are still at it. The diplomats wanted to strangle us with the sanitary cordon and the blockade, the kulaks thought to crush us by starvation, the Trotskyites by a dastardly shot in the back, the foreign quill-drivers by calumny; foaming at the mouth, they invented

cock-and-bull stories about us, called our cherished dreams the ravings of madmen and prophesied the failure of the five-year plan.

My people, laughing at those "prophecies" and fearing no threats, went on laying brick by brick; it went along its great way towards communism without calling a halt for rest.

Those were days of tremendous uplift! Was it to be wondered at that I could not sit still? In those days the Bolsheviks were just launching their attack upon the Arctic. I got an assignment from the editors, bought myself deerskin boots and a big furry cap with ear-flaps, and stood waiting at the snowy aerodrome, prepared for "great exploits" and "glory."

Uncle Vasya, the Arctic pilot with whom I was to fly out, met me rather coldly, and I couldn't understand why. I had done nothing yet to incur his disapproval.

Afterwards, when we got friendly, he looked me straight in the face out of his clear blue eyes and explained simply:

"I could have taken ninety kilogrammes of petrol instead of you!"

Planes now fly from Moscow to Dickson all times of the year, day and night, and make the journey in several hours. But then, sixteen years ago, it was an unusual trip and took a month. I learned then what winter flying was, and head winds, and Arctic frosts, when even eau-de-Cologne freezes in the cockpit; and a forced landing on a deserted headland, where one learns the cardinal virtue of an Arctic worker—patience; and snow-storms at Dudinka; and sludge ice on the Igarka channel, when we worked all day pulling the plane out with the aid of ropes, and then three hundred members of the local Osoaviakhim*

* Society for the Promotion of Defence, Aviation and Chemical Works.--*Tr.*

Society marched back and forth trampling down a take-off strip. . . .

And I saw how vast and fantastically beautiful our native land was! Steppes, mountains, taiga, forest-tundra and tundra sailed past under the wings of our plane; our engine was now singing over the icebound neck of the Yenisei bay, and the world below was bluish-white, unreal. This was the Arctic!

I had visualized it from the windows of my Moscow flat—a white silent wilderness, solitary huts buried in the snow, long trains of reindeer sledges and strange, grim-looking bearded men in furs and leather with knives at their belts and rifles over their shoulders.

At first it was just as I had pictured it. There were the wide snowy sweeps, and the blue ice-hummocks, and the silence, and dog teams, harnessed tandem and fan-wise, and on Dickson we were met by bearded men in hooded parkas, and many of them actually had hunting knives with walrus-tusk handles dangling at their belts; and in the mess-room of the wintering station we were treated to bear-flesh beefsteaks and raw frozen fish shredded into thin strips, and spirits out of big flasks, and antiscorbutic extract of cranberry, which was so sour that it puckered one's mouth. On the wall, in the place of honour, hung the fragment of a propeller, and through the window one could see the old Dickson lighthouse—an ice-coated wooden tower with a green bell on the top. I took this all in with hungry, insatiable eyes.

And then, after the first toasts had been drunk and we dropped into conversation about the main thing—life at the wintering station—I was astonished to hear familiar speeches, familiar words, such as Plan, Emulation, Shock-Workers. And we were promptly dragged off, driven down on dog sledges to the construction site—the new harbour, the docks, the coal station, the radio centre, the radio beacon.

People showed me their handiwork with the quiet pride of the builder already so familiar to me, and I waited, smiling, to hear, as I had heard in the Urals and in Siberia, the usual:

“Six months ago there was nothing here!”

And suddenly I heard something that I had not heard either in the Urals or in Siberia:

“Four months ago all this was under water!” And we were told the history of the radio centre on Dickson Island.

One autumn night a violent north-westerly, sweeping down without warning, sank a barge at Cape Krechatnik, containing all the equipment for the radio centre. The people saw the radio centre, for the sake of which they had come out here to the world's end, sinking slowly into the icy sea. Ah, well! They were not to blame. The elements! Ships were still lying in Dickson Bay—they could, if they wanted, embark for home. Or they could stay here. Simply “winter over,” get their “Arctic pay” and do nothing.

But to the people standing on the shore neither of these thoughts occurred. After the shock of the first moment was over, they all, of one accord, plunged into the icy water. All of them—builders, divers, radio operators, and even the old doctor and the cook; boys came running down from the harbour and plunged straight into the sea. They were all masters here, for they knew no other master.

They worked in the water for many hours until the last case was torn out of the accursed jaws of the hungry sea. And then, on the shore, the people started smashing the cases open with axes to save the delicate apparatuses from rust as they had just saved them from the water. They took everything to pieces, carefully wiping and greasing each part.

All those days they lived on the shore under rain and wind in canvas tents, going without sleep, rest, or

hot food, and did not think of resting until they had finished their job. It would be good to have a rest and warm oneself up now! But there was no time for rest—they had to build. And so, without a murmur, they took up their axes and saws.

That evening we sat in the cozy mess-room on New Dickson, chatting in low tones. Talking about the Mainland, about Moscow. About the new Metro. About the abolition of the rationing system. About theatres. About Kachalov, the actor. About football. About Okhotny Ryad in Moscow, which had been rebuilt and was said to be unrecognizable. "Is that true?" About the carnival in the Moscow Park of Culture. About the latest film and the latest song by Lebedev-Kumach—they would have to learn it! In a word, about everything that Soviet men can discuss, even when they meet in latitude 73 North.

One of the winterers, a woman, staggered me with an unexpected question:

"What are women wearing on the Mainland now, Comrade Bazhanov?"

Everyone laughed. But she was not in the least put out. She merely flushed with vexation and repeated stubbornly:

"No, but really! What is the latest fashion?" And the women behind her gave their murmurous support.

I was confounded.

"I don't know," I stammered. I really didn't, so help me God! I didn't have the faintest idea.

But I had to say something. I tried to recollect what my women acquaintances in Moscow wore. This conjured up a vision of Moscow, its streets, the crowds on them. I suddenly recalled the girl parachutists of my acquaintance (I was not the only one to be smitten by them): they wore blue overalls with silvery zippers and chic black berets.

But this apparently was not what my fair questioner meant.

I recalled the girls of the Metro shafts. They really were the queens of Moscow's streets in those days. How proudly they strode through the city in their broad-brimmed canvas hats and rubber waders, bespattered with concrete and clay, with their hands thrust jauntily into the pockets of their quilted trousers!

I recollected the loveliest girl in the capital: she had been carried through Red Square on the First of May on a huge globe, but she had worn only a scarlet singlet and shorts. I remembered the Political Department girls in tightly belted yellow sheepskin coats; the tractor-driver girls in their huge gauntlets; the collective-farm women who arrived in Moscow to attend rallies. Most of them wore dark-blue tailor-cut jackets and bright silk kerchiefs.

I remembered the girls I had seen in theatres, cafés and parks: they were all well-dressed, elegant, but each in her own way! But the fashion, damn it, what was the latest fashion in Moscow?

I don't remember now what I answered the Arctic ladies—it was something incoherent and unintelligible—but I did want to say something to this effect:

"My dear fashion-mongers! I don't know what the mode in Moscow is, what the regulation length for skirts is, and what shape hats are constructed. But don't worry! Believe me, even here, at the world's end, you will never be out of fashion, the Soviet fashion! If you were to appear in Moscow in the clothes you stand in—those fur boots, embroidered with beads, in those quilted trousers and deerskin gauntlets, the women of Moscow would look at you and your costume with admiration and even envy."

Uncle Vasya flew back, and I remained to winter. The wintering company was a gay friendly little communi-

ty. Here, on the shore of the Arctic Ocean, we never for a moment felt lost or forgotten. The Soviet Mainland was both far and near. We heard its voice every day. We breathed the same air, lived in the same atmosphere, and soared with it to the same starry heights.

When there was rough weather or a magnetic storm, I usually pressed my ear to the loudspeaker—or the loudspeaker to my ear—and listened, not to the broadcasts (they were inaudible), but to the whistling of the ether and the astral commotion, and through it all I could hear a far-away soft rhythmic tapping, like the throbbing of my country's great kind heart.

One day—it was in May, and audibility was excellent, and outside the window the snow lay in pink hills, bathed in the light of the now never-setting sun—we heard Stalin's speech.

A speech by Stalin is always a gala event for Soviet people. This one was such a triumphant hymn to man, that every one of us suddenly felt extraordinarily proud! It was of us that he said that "of all the valuable capital the world possesses, the most valuable and decisive is people."

All that evening, excited and animated men, smoking pipes, crowded the mess-room—radio operators, radio mechanics, builders, fitters, divers—those very same cadres of whom Stalin had so warmly said they decide everything! People shouted and argued excitedly. As always after a speech by Stalin, one had to live and work differently, better, cleaner than before.

"We've got to live restlessly now, comrades!" cried Volodya, the radio mechanic, a lad with reddish "Arctic" side-whiskers. "Look at the wonderful equipment we have: Nansen and Amundsen never dreamt of it!"

Indeed, the whole station felt an uplift; everyone wanted to work still better. Presently people came to the fore who grew famous throughout the Arctic.

It was then, in the 'thirties, that the word "notable" came to acquire a new meaning in the Soviet vocabulary, standing for a notion that was new to human history.

One could not belong to this "notability" of the working man either through patronage and influence or lucky accident of birth. Fame ceased to be the lot of the select few. Anyone now could win it, and there was enough of it to go round.

For the first time in history man "made his way in the world" without crushing other people, without acting meanly or grovelling before anyone, simply by working, working honestly and enthusiastically, in noble emulation with his fellow-men. Distinction was not bestowed upon him for all time; yesterday's hero was forgotten as soon as he began to work poorly—he was no longer a shock-worker. Shock-worker was the most famous and honourable title in the 'thirties; celebrated airmen and Arctic ship's captains were likewise called shock-workers. But one already felt that a new word and a new name would appear at any moment to take the place of the old and to designate the new phenomenon, the new rung in the ladder of life.

Naturally, I could never have dreamt that this name would first appear in my native parts, the Donbas, of all places, and would be conferred on an ordinary miner. But I listened eagerly for every bit of news about the Donbas over the air. Once again I felt drawn back there with all my heart and soul. What witchery lay in that smoky inhospitable land to cast such a spell of yearning over me? Apparently I was fated all my life to yearn for it in separation, to strive eagerly towards it, return to it only to leave it again.

Our Arctic wintering was over in August. Ships arrived, bringing new personnel to replace us.

We gathered for the last time in the mess-room. The change-over took place without preliminaries, like

the changing of the guard. The old winterer took off his work clothes, the new one put them on and bent his strong back to receive the cargoes. The old mechanic got off the tractor and wiped his hands on a ball of tow, while the new one took his place and rode off. The radio operators, meteorologists, and hydrologists started their watch, and the new aerologist released his pilot balloon into the dazzling sky.

Two staffs sit at the table. Two wintering parties. The Soviet flag is passed carefully from hand to hand. The old chief raises his glass and wishes the new party a happy wintering! The new chief clinks glasses with him and wishes the old party a happy journey home and a good rest!

The steamer gives a parting hoot. Farewell, Arctic! Greetings to the Mainland!

But whence that sudden queer pang and tightening of the throat when the black rocks of the island slowly melt in the mist? So a particle of one's heart is left here too! The same old yearning.

My journalist friends met me at the railway station in Moscow. They rushed at me in a noisy crowd, arms flung wide for an embrace. But upon catching sight of me they recoiled. I disappointed their expectations. They had come to meet a hermit, an ascetic, an Arctic martyr, but found instead a whacking young man bursting with health.

They were so stunned that it was quite a time before they plucked up courage to offer me a ticket to a sanatorium which they had solicitously purchased in advance.

Nevertheless, I went to the health resort, but I did not stay there long.

I got a telegram from my newspaper which put me all of a dither: "Fly out immediately Donbas. Wonderful things starting there. Recommend Steep Maria colliery."

The next morning found me sitting in the plane. It was the 2nd of September 1935.

After a long absence I was returning home again. What were those wonderful things that had started there? What would I see? Who would I meet?

Suddenly I recollected a far-off November morning in 1930, the road leading to the Steep Maria, the hill-side, the roseate dawn over the colliery town, and two boys. What were their names? What had happened to them? Had they remained at the mine, as they had sworn to, or had they run away, borne along by the stream of life, like pebbles in a swift mountain stream, which buffets and polishes them, knocks them about and then flings them ashore on some sand-bank?

I believe one of the boys was called Victor.

* 2 *

One hot June midday our two friends were walking down the street of the colliery community. They were Victor Abrosimov and Andrei Voronko. By June 1935 their combined age had reached the respectable figure of forty-five.

"The acacias are fading," Victor said cheerfully. "Time to go to Chibiryaki, old chap!"

Every spring they went back to Chibiryaki for their holidays. They looked forward to that time during the whole long winter. They thought of their meeting with their families, their schoolmates and the Psyol, the quiet river of their childhood, with a thrill of anticipatory pleasure. "Yes, it's grand on the Psyol!" they reminisced. "It really is!" And every time they left for Chibiryaki they felt as if they were sailing for some distant shore where lay the land of carefree childhood.

But their parents were growing old; many of their childhood friends had left the town; the girls of their acquaintance had married; the Psyol alone remained unchanged, flowing placidly, listening patiently to vows of love and dreams, and bearing them down to the sea. A fine river, the Psyol. And yet, the year before, the two friends had spent only a week in Chibiryaki. They became restless and returned home.

For home now meant the Steep Maria, the mine. When all is said and done, a man's home is where he works, not where he spends his holidays.

Now only at the Steep Maria did they feel really at home. It was here they had their interests, their real comrades, their rivals and their enemies. They walked down the street, nodding to passers-by and responding to their greetings. Here everyone knew them. They were now real miners, masters of their craft. Their photographs, yellowed by rain and time, had for long been hanging on the honour board at the check-gate.

They still lived in "Uncle Onisim's Hostel," but they now had a room to themselves. They shared all their belongings, and if one of them ever took it into his head to get married, they'd have some difficulty in dividing all their property—books, furniture, plates, gramophone, and so on.

However, neither thought of marrying yet.

"I wouldn't mind going to a health resort this year," Andrei said musingly. "The seaside. . ."

Victor's only reply was a laugh. Well, why not? They could go wherever they wanted for that matter. The administration would readily give them free warrants to a sanatorium, or they could pay for them themselves. Yesterday's pay was still intact. It seemed to Victor that the two of them could buy up the whole world.

They sauntered aimlessly down the street, exchanging jokes with those they met and smoking with their

hands in their pockets, indolently shifting the cigarette from one corner of the mouth to the other.

They were both dressed in their Sunday best—blue serge suits, peaked caps and collarless shirts. Who the hell wanted those neck-chokers anyway? And wasn't the street their own home street? No need to flaunt neckties there. Any girl in the town could tell you what kind of ties Victor wore when he did wear one. His tastes ran to bright colours—something red with blue dots, or gay flecks on a pale brown. As for Andrei, he had no use for ties, he felt uncomfortable in them. He was fond of embroidered shirts, but today he too had blossomed out in a white silk shirt—without a collar, of course, but complete with dangling stud. That was the latest foible in colliery fashion, a defiance of convention by these gay young bachelors, as if to say "Here you are, take it or leave it!"

"Fine pair of bridegrooms running loose there!" an elderly woman by the well threw after them.

They heard it and burst out laughing.

They were brimming over with health and youth. They felt, vaguely and sometimes disturbingly, a tremendous inner force that seemed to carry a promise of great things to come. But what those "great things" were they could not tell. Their labours at the pit-face could not exhaust that inner strength. And on the mornings of their days off work, they would awaken with that strength stirring within them, wondering what they could do with the hours ahead. Attend a lecture? Go and have some beer? Or, on this particular morning, would something unforeseen, something glorious, break upon them?—for their hearts were wide-open to receive all that was good and beautiful.

Hands in pockets, Andrei and Victor walked down the street with a slightly rolling gait, clinkers crunching underfoot and the small change jingling in their pockets.

It was a sultry day, and waves of heat and the acrid fumes of sulphur flowed into the mining town from the simmering waste dumps, where the pyrites lay smouldering.

Their aimless saunter took them to the market-place. Here it was even hotter, and the horses stood dozing by the collective-farm carts, lazily swinging their tails to drive off the fat, drowsy market flies. The vendors, worn out by the heat, were silent. There were few customers about. It was already noon, and the market was dying down like a camp-fire which had been left to burn itself out.

The boys walked idly down the rows of stalls, and Victor once more became proudly conscious of the fact that he could buy anything he wanted here—with the result that he wanted nothing.

"Let Polly tell your fortune!" they suddenly heard an apathetic voice behind them. Turning round, they saw a man in a squashed green gypsy hat with a cord round it instead of a band, and an old, grumpy-looking parrot perched on his shoulder.

"Your fortune!" the man in the green hat repeated listlessly, glancing in the direction of the young miners. The "gypsy" was, in fact, an old Russian with kind, melancholy eyes and a drooping moustache, as seedy and shabby as his bird.

"So you're selling fortunes?" Victor said with a smile.

"Yes," the man with the parrot answered matter-of-factly, as if he were selling matches. "Want to buy one?"

"What for?" Andrei laughed.

"Wait a minute!" Victor checked him, his eyes agleam with mischief. "Hold on! What sort of fortunes are you peddling?" he asked the man.

"You'll see when Poll draws it out."

"Don't you know what it is yourself?"

"How can I tell?" the fortune vendor said with a shrug. "I'm not supposed to know."

"It works out, then, that the parrot is cleverer than you are?"

"Who, Polly? No! She's a fool. How could a bird be cleverer than a man?" he said, suddenly taking offence. "That's blasphemy. Going against God!"

"So you believe in God, too?" smiled Andrei.

"Well, not exactly—God . . . Nature . . . Science . . . it's one and the same thing!" the vendor explained dispiritedly. The drowsy heat and the dreariness of the dying market were telling on him too. Or perhaps he was simply hungry. "Luck! Fortune!"

"That's interesting!" Victor burst out laughing. "Here, let's have five kopeks' worth of fortune."

The man took the parrot off his shoulder and moved the little box with the tickets up to it.

"Come on, Poll, pretty Polly!" he coaxed the sullen bird. "Draw the young man's fortune out."

The parrot gave a vicious peck at the box and pulled out a slip. Victor read: "You were born under a favourable sign of the Zodiac. Unexpected fortune awaits you, but beware of green eyes and a bad neighbour."

"Plain as a pikestaff!" laughed Victor.

"Won't you buy one, young man?" the vendor offered Andrei.

The grumpy parrot pulled out another slip, and Andrei unfolded it with a little thrill of excitement, as though it could really foretell his destiny. He read: "You were born under a favourable sign of the Zodiac. Unexpected fortune awaits you, but beware of green eyes and a bad neighbour."

"Here, what the devil!" Andrei cried, getting quite angry. "All the tickets are the same, it seems!"

"No. . ." the vendor stammered, somewhat taken aback. "They're not. All depends on fortune."

"So our fortune's the same!" Victor cried with a laugh and slapped his friend on the back.

Andrei, honest soul, was angry, however. He felt ashamed of the momentary excitement he had experienced when opening the slip of paper, and resented the trick which this fool bird and that old rogue in the green gypsy hat had played on him.

"Your bird's a damn fool!" he said hotly. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself, an old man like you swindling people. I've a good mind to hand you over to the militia."

The fortune vendor stood listening with a dismal air, making no attempt to argue or escape. He had probably received many knocks in life and acquired some "philosophy."

"Keep your hair on, Andrei!" said Victor. "I'd like to get to the bottom of this fortune business. What will you take for the whole box?" he suddenly asked the vendor. The man stared at him blankly.

"What?"

"D'you know what you are?" Victor said with a laugh. "You're a living survival of capitalism. And I want to buy up your stock in trade, the whole bag of tricks."

"But there are different fortunes here. You can't have 'em all," the man stammered, getting so excited that he even took his hat off, revealing a grey, bald head. "Five rubles!" he suddenly said, reddening. "All right, make it three." He made a sweeping flourish with his green hat, like the flapping of the parrot's wing.

Victor, with a grin, gave him three rubles and emptied the contents of the box into his cap. "Here you are!" he said with a pleased air, shaking the cap with the fortune slips. "Now watch me tell fortunes."

He started off, crying hilariously: "Fortunes for sale!" However, the market had broken up and was deserted, save for a belated cart stranded in the middle of the square. A young woman in the cart nudged her husband.

"Petro, I say, Petro! They're selling something. Maybe it's something we need?"

But Petro brushed her off with a lazy gesture.

"It's nothing o' the sort! Just talk!" He had evidently taken Victor and Andrei for people from the Palace of Culture trying to organize games.

Victor's spirits fell. Again he did not know what to do with himself.

"How about a drink of beer, Andrei?" he suggested tentatively.

"Don't feel like it," Andrei answered. "Let's go to the railway station. Eh?"

"Oh . . . all right!"

And so to the railway station they went.

* 3 *

They went by an old familiar road. Victor had once left the Steep Maria by that road, and the loyal Andrei had gone after him and brought him back. What a night that had been! But they never thought of it now.

"Look!" Andrei said. "The tram tracks are nearly finished. And everyone used to laugh at the town's service department!" Victor glanced absently at the tram track—it was practically finished.

"Yes," he said. "That's fine! A useful job of work!" Realizing that he was holding the cap with the fortune slips, he laughed.

"What shall I do with 'em?"

"Oh, chuck them away!" advised Andrei.

"Can't do that," Victor demurred gravely. "Cost three rubles."

He shook the cap, then suddenly decided to put it on his head, slips and all.

"Well, Andrei, what's your opinion about fortune?"

"Oh! Don't bother me."

"But tell me, from the Marxist point of view."

"Well, fortune's fortune."

"Yes. And...?"

"Well..." Andrei squeezed the words out, "in my opinion it's, er... so to say... well, the fulfilment of all my desires, I suppose."

"And what are your desires?"

"Well, to make a go of my job... to get on... and, oh, leave me alone, for God's sake!"

"I see," grinned Victor. "Well, that's all right as far as the job goes. But what about yourself?"

"What about myself?"

"What d'you want for yourself?"

"Aren't I working for myself? You're a funny chap, Victor!"

"Yes. That's true," Victor agreed. "Talk about fortune, but what about fame? Isn't fame fortune? Have you ever dreamt of fame, Andrei?"

"Of what?"

"Well, just fame, I mean!"

"But we're not airmen!"

"Even so!"

"You're a funny chap, Victor!" Andrei said with a shrug. "What fame can there be for a miner? Our fame is down below; it can't very well show its black and grimy face."

"Yes, you're right. You can hardly call that fame!" Victor agreed once more. "Now think of our photographs—they've been hanging for years on the honour board. But who's ever heard of us outside the Maria?"

"The main thing's to have a clear conscience," Andrei said didactically. "Fame's nothing!"

"Well, and what about love?"

"Love?"

"Well, just love, I mean."

"Love..." Andrei repeated thoughtfully. "Yes, that's a big thing—a great joy, they say."

"How do you know?"

"I didn't say I did—that's what people say."

"Oho, Andrei!" Victor laughed slyly. "I've got a suspicion you're in love."

"Me? Who with?"

"You ought to know."

"I'm not, Victor. May I fall down dead if I'm telling a lie," Andrei cried excitedly.

"All right, all right! Tell me all about it."

"But there's nothing to tell!"

"Isn't there? Oh, you're a sly one!"

"Me?"

"You!"

"Me?" Andrei could have cried with vexation. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself!" he said in a voice that trembled. "If you're hinting at Vera, I've got nothing to do with her!"

"Then who has, I'd like to know?" chuckled Victor.

"But she doesn't interest me in the least."

"You're a bad lad, Andrei!" Victor said, laughing. "Turning the poor kid's head and then backing out."

"I turned her head?" Andrei exclaimed, now thoroughly upset. "Why, I never spoke a word to her. We never even kissed."

"Get along with you!" Victor teased him, knowing full well that he had touched a sore spot. Andrei, quite unwittingly and much to his embarrassment, had captivated the susceptible heart of Vera, his old neighbour's daughter. He had not even suspected it until his mates had told him, and then, blushing furiously, he referred to her on the spur of an angry moment as "that curly-headed little idiot." Modest and honest lad that he was, he could not help feeling that an unwarranted responsibility had been thrust upon him, and he did not know what to do about it.

"You wait, I'll pull her curly hair for her—that'll knock the nonsense out of her head."

They were approaching the railway station.

"I can see you doing it!" Victor laughed. "You wait, she'll have you married before you know where you are."

"Never in her life!" Andrei cried with horror, and looked round fearfully.

"Oh yes, she will! Let's go and have a drink while you're still a bachelor. The wife won't let you afterwards."

They went into the refreshment room and ordered beer. There was some bustle on the station platform because the Moscow-Mineralniye Vodi* express was expected in.

"Let's go to Mineralniye Vodi, Andrei, eh?"

"No. I want to go to the seaside," the latter answered reflectively, wiping the froth off his lips.

"All right, let it be the seaside. Anyway, mineral waters are no good for miners' stomachs—don't you agree?"

At last the express came in. The boys went out on to the platform. The train stood here for only a minute. They watched it pull out with a calm, slightly amused look in which there was neither yearning nor envy. Why should there be? Couldn't they go to Mineralniye Vodi if they wanted. But Andrei preferred the sea.

The train disappeared, leaving a cloud of smoke and steam behind it, and the platform emptied. The only person on it was a girl, evidently a passenger off the express. She stood with her back to the boys, young and slender, in a trim little black suit from under the jacket of which a white piqué collar peeped coquettishly.

"Ahem! Here's an eyeful!" Victor whispered admiringly and, with a wink at his friend, he suddenly strode up towards the girl with Andrei trailing after him.

"Carry your bags, Miss?" Victor shouted in imitation of a porter.

* Mineralniye Vodi—A spa town in the Northern Caucasus.—*Tr.*

The girl turned round and a joyous exclamation escaped her.

"Victor!"

He was dumbfounded.

"Dasha, you?" There was a mixture of amazement and disappointment in his voice. It was only Dasha, old Prokop's daughter. But how she had changed! Why, she was quite a young lady, you could take her for a film actress—beautiful, slim—and a stranger. Still, it was only Dasha, the kid he had once all but pulled by the plaits in the semi-dark gallery.

She stood there, gay, excited and flushed to the tips of her ears, and smiled upon them both. That's how it always is when you come home after a long absence—the first acquaintance you meet seems to be the nearest and dearest person in the world.

"What great hefty fellows you've grown!" she said, shaking their hands.

"And what about yourself? You're a real lady!"

Victor and Dasha began talking nineteen to the dozen, hardly listening to what the other was saying. Andrei alone, overcome by a sudden shyness, said nothing.

"So you've come home for the holidays?"

"Oh, I was terribly homesick!"

"But Uncle Prokop never mentioned a word about your coming."

"I've missed home dreadfully."

"You might have sent a wire for someone to meet you."

"What for? I'm not a child! And then I thought the tram—"

"The tram will be started soon!" Andrei suddenly said in a deep bass—and then stopped in confusion. He was quite overwhelmed. Surely this couldn't be Dasha, the funny dirty-faced little lamp girl with the skimpy pigtails. She was quite a young lady now, an undergraduate of the

Mining Institute. What a wide, clear forehead she had! It seemed to Andrei that he had never seen a girl with such an intelligent forehead. And her eyes! She looked into a man's face frankly, boldly and gaily, not like that "curly-haired little idiot!" Vera. No, never before had Andrei met such a charming and such an unapproachable girl! as this Dasha. He could not tear his eyes away. He was vexed with himself for staring at her "like a silly ass" but he couldn't help himself. "Fire-Fly!" He suddenly recollected the name the miners used to call her by.

"But what are we standing here for, like fools?" Victor suddenly said. He picked up Dasha's suit-case, which was rather heavy. "Oho!" he said, "this'll cost you double weight, Ma'am!"

He felt as free and easy with Dasha as he did with any other of the pit girls. When all was said and done she was only Dasha, with that funny little snub nose and freckles, and unruly hair escaping from under her beret. Nothing out of the ordinary—just a nice little girl, not a patch on some he had seen in his time.

"Well, come along!" he said in a business-like tone. "The short-cut or the road?"

They decided to take the short-cut across the flats by way of Roaring Ravine, where they knew every foot-path by heart. They set out at once, and Dasha kept up a running stream of eager inquiries—how were things at the Steep Maria and what was the news? The news? Victor merely shrugged his shoulders. What news could there be at the colliery! They were working, that's all.

"We're driving a new level now," he said, "Number 640. A recent winning."

"I know," said Dasha. "My Dad's there, too."

"Aye, he's our overman."

"How's Dad? Must be growing old?"

"Him grow old?" Victor sounded surprised and even hurt. "He can never grow old!" he added with that note

of affection that always came into his voice when he spoke of his old teacher.

"Still, you can't get away from it—he's fifty-seven," Dasha said with a troubled sigh.

"He invited us to his section himself!" Victor said proudly. "Didn't he, Andrei?"

"He did."

"And what other news is there?" asked Dasha.

"They've installed a new hauling engine."

"A big one?"

"Power enough and to spare."

"And how's production going?"

"We're fulfilling the plan."

"Is the star burning?"

"Yes, it's burning all right!"

"We've got a new fan, too," Andrei ventured quietly.

"Yes!" laughed Victor. "They put it in after all. And the song it makes! Like a blessed orchestra."

"An axial fan?" Dasha asked with interest.

"Of course! But the song it makes! The vent is in the Shubin Woods, behind the pit-head. Howls like a hundred devils! Listen! Maybe we can hear it from here."

They stopped and listened. The air around them hummed, and buzzed, and whined in every key. From somewhere came a clang of iron, the thud of a steam hammer, the shrill scream of the station's shunting engine and the crackling of an electro-welding apparatus, but all these diverse sounds mingled into a deep monotonous rumble through which it was impossible to distinguish the smooth, melancholy whine of the Steep Maria's new ventilation fan.

"No, it's quiet. Can't hear it," Victor said regretfully. It really seemed to him that a deep stillness reigned over the steppe. He was so used to the noise around the railway station and the mine that he no longer noticed it.

Andrei swung Dasha's suit-case on to his shoulder, and they moved on. Dasha thirsted for more news.

"Is it true they've started sinking an air shaft?" she asked.

"Yes, they've started...."

"Where, where?" Dasha said excitedly. Her interest was not merely that of an undergraduate of the Mining Institute. She had been accustomed since childhood to thinking of the mine as a part of her own life. And ever since she was a child the phrase "winning new ground" had always thrilled her.

Surprisingly enough, there proved to be quite a lot of news at the Steep Maria, especially when it came to individuals. This man had died, that one had gone away, one had been promoted, another had failed to make the grade; so-and-so had married and so-and-so had been taken into the army, and another had bought a three-windowed cottage and even a cow....

"Haven't you boys married yet?" Dasha asked archly.

"Our brides haven't been born yet!" Victor answered proudly. "What about yourself?"

"Me? Be sensible!"

"There are lots of likely lads in Moscow, I hear. Are you out for an actor?"

"Why an actor?" Dasha asked in surprise.

"All you girls are crazy about actors and singers—collecting their pictures!" Victor retorted scornfully. "As if I don't know you! Have you got a big collection?"

"Not even a postcard."

"Good for you! None of them would think of marrying a snub nose like you!" The more a girl appealed to Victor the ruder he was to her. Dasha, who knew this horse-putter style of love-making, was not a bit offended. She answered blandly: "Never mind! I daresay there are plenty of boys who have no objection to snub noses."

"True enough! There's a blind groom for every squint-eyed bride, as the saying goes."

They descended Roaring Ravine and followed a foot-path running amid smiling green alder trees and young hazel bushes.

"Does Mitya Zakorko still work at the mine?" Dasha asked in a casual way.

"Why, yes! Where else could he be?" answered Victor, then suddenly stopped and said suspiciously: "What makes you ask about Mitya?"

"Oh, he wrote me he was being taken into the navy."

"Ah!" Victor exclaimed, experiencing a sudden pang of jealousy. "So you two write to one another?"

"Anything wrong with that?" Dasha said, somewhat taken aback. The next minute she threw her head up proudly and looked Victor squarely in the face.

"Well, I never knew you were in love with Zakorko!" he said with a grin. "He's not a bad fellow, Mitya. Pity he's ginger."

"You have no idea what Mitya is!" Dasha said with sudden warmth. "You mustn't judge by appearances. He keeps the whole family. And what a family! All little ones, and no father."

"Oh, all right!" Victor growled. He hated to hear anyone praised, especially when it was Mitya Zakorko, his eternal rival. "Run and kiss him, for all I care," he added huffily and fell silent.

Andrei, too, was silent. He was sweating under his burden, but he gave no sign. The suit-case was heavy, and the boys carried it in turns. Andrei, however, yielded his turn reluctantly. He would have carried both suit-case and Dasha into the mining town in his arms if she'd let him.

Dasha, however, noticed that Andrei was getting tired.

"Here, let me carry it for a change," she said, taking hold of the suit-case.

"Oh, no, you can't do that!" cried Andrei, unaware that he had addressed Dasha with the formal "you" instead of "thou." He swung the suit-case on to his back and ran on ahead doubled up, as if afraid that someone would take the precious burden from him.

Victor noticed the mode of address Andrei had used, and immediately adopted it himself.

"Come, this won't do, Comrade Mining Engineer!" he said with a grin. "Please don't put yourself out, Comrade Mining Engineer! You mustn't tax your strength! He's just a common worker, a miner, a donkey—nothing'll happen to him! Hi, you there, get a move on!" he yelled to his comrade, and putting his fingers in his mouth, gave a piercing horse-putter's whistle as if he were urging on a horse.

"Just as you like!" Dasha said with a disdainful shrug. "I could have carried it myself."

"How could you think of such a thing, Comrade Mining Engineer?" Victor went on with his fooling. "Why, you're a lady—a dainty perfumed creature. Your hands are soft and delicate, your plaits are like little pig-tails. *You* work in a mine? Mitya would never let you."

Dasha finally lost her temper.

"Enough of that!" she said angrily. "Anyone would think you'd been working in the mine for years! Don't forget I was born here. I remember the time when you scurried through the workings like a frightened hare."

"What?" cried Victor with well-simulated astonishment. "So you're a local! Well, I'll be blowed! A pit girl, eh? Whew!"

Andrei suddenly felt like putting the suit-case down and, for the first time in his life, punching his pal's head for him.

However, Victor realized he had gone far enough with his chaff. He took off his cap to wipe his damp brow, and

the "gypsy's" fortune slips scattered like a swarm of yellow butterflies.

"Fortune's flying away!" he yelled. "Hi, catch 'em!" and he started catching them in the air. "Dasha! Would you like to know your fortune?" he cried gaily.

"Leave me alone!" Dasha said huffily.

"Hullo?" he said with genuine surprise. "You're not offended, are you?"

The artlessness of it made Dasha laugh despite herself. Fancy losing her temper over such a silly thing!

"Come on, tell me my fortune!" she said. "Silly ass."

Victor started fussing around.

"Hi, Polly, Polly, come over here!" he cried to Andrei with a wink. "Pull the lady's fortune out. The best you can find."

"No, no, I'll do it myself!" Dasha said quickly. "What hand must I take it with—the left?" and she took a slip with the left hand.

"Read it out!" Victor cried impatiently. "Now, now, that won't do!"

"Well, of all the nonsense—" Dasha said with a little shrug, and read it out: "'You were born under the sign of Capricorn. You will be lucky in everything except married life. Beware of black eyes. You will find happiness in the end with grey ones.' Piffle!" She crushed the slip of paper and tossed it angrily on the grass.

Victor guffawed.

"Don't get upset, Dasha. It isn't good for the health! What's married life? Tripe! You'll find life good enough as an old maid."

"Me upset?" retorted Dasha. "Who said I want to marry, anyway? I can see myself marrying a no-good like you." She looked at Victor and gave a little shriek.

"What's the matter?" Andrei cried, alarmed.

She pointed her finger at Victor, shaking with laughter. She laughed uproariously. Horse-putters in the pit

laughed like that, fit to bring the roof down, laughed as only miners laugh, not as townfolks. Andrei burst out laughing, too, although he had not the faintest notion what it was all about.

"Look, oh, look!" she cried, amid peals of laughter, still pointing at Victor. "There they are—the black eyes! Oo—they give me the creeps!"

Victor was taken aback.

"What if they are black?" he muttered.

He was nettled now. He couldn't stand anyone laughing at his appearance. He considered himself a handsome fellow and was specially proud of his eyes. The colliery girls were really afraid of them. "I've got fiery eyes," Victor would tell himself with boyish conceit.

"Hi, black eyes! Where are you off to?" Dasha shouted, and began singing mockingly: "'Black eye, oh burning eye. . . It will haunt me till I die. . .'"

He spun round:

"I bet you are afraid of 'em," he said hoarsely. "I bet you are!"

"Who, me?" Dasha retorted. She was afraid of no one's eyes.

She was a pit girl to the core, a miner's daughter—bold, independent and proud. She often repeated her father's favourite saying: "A miner bends his back to his work, never to people!"

"We'll see about that," Victor said ominously. "Moscow swanker!"

At this point Andrei threw the suit-case down and went up to Victor.

"Carry it!" he rapped out.

"What?" Victor asked, uncomprehending.

"Carry it, damn you!" Andrei shouted with a vehemence that startled Dasha.

Victor, who feared nobody in the world and enjoyed nothing better than a good fight, quailed before his mild

and gentle friend. He knew that there were moments when it was best to leave Andrei alone, and he meekly shouldered the suit-case and walked ahead in silence. Dasha was so amazed that she could only stare at Andrei speechless.

"What a temper the man's got!" she thought with a shiver, but said nothing. She did not know what to make of her two unexpected "beaux" whose strange friendship puzzled her. She had no time for reflection. They were already entering the settlement where the mine, the gardens and orchards met her with their dear familiar breath—that peculiar medley of smells compounded of leaves and smoke, of habitation and steppe, of the hot panting earth and the still stagnant pond, of scorched grass and moist vapour, of cinders and wormwood, of road dust and intrepid flowers growing in front gardens, of wild olives in the ravine and coal-dust from the separators—that inimitable, pungent, and, to an outsider, strange blend of odours, so characteristic of a colliery, which to a miner spells home.

"Home at last! Home!" thought Dasha with a thrill of delight, almost crying for sheer joy. She no longer walked, she ran down the street. Here was the school she used to go to—only yesterday it seemed. And there was the park. That dry little gully should be here somewhere—ah, here it was . . . and here was the path. And that steep hill. Lovely hill—the Himalayas of childhood! Next came Dogtown. But where was it? What's happened to Dogtown? But of that later. Here was green Office Street, Director's Gardens . . . then came Shock-Worker Street with its little white stone-built houses, with front gardens, and pansies, and carnations, and night jasmines—the miner's delight. And here, at last—how wildly her heart beat!—was the familiar wicket-gate. . . . "Home!"

Dasha halted.

"Thanks for the help, boys!" she said hurriedly, giving them her two hands.

"Oh, don't mention it!" Victor said gallantly, detaining Dasha's hand in his. "When shall we be seeing each other, Dasha?"

"Some time."

"No, that won't do. You make a date, right and proper."

"All right. The day after tomorrow."

"No, really? Where?" Victor said, overjoyed.

"Inbye."

"Not on your life!" laughed Victor. "My love needs the sky! It feels cramped underground." Saying which, he lightly but confidently slipped his arm round the girl's waist. "Well, what do you say?"

Dasha wriggled free and ran up to the wicket. Suddenly she caught herself and stopped. She pulled a wallet out of her pocket.

"Here's your fee," she said, handing Victor a three-ruble note. "Keep the change."

"What for?" the latter said, perplexed.

"Give the porter his due! Good-bye, boys!" And with a peal of laughter she disappeared through the gate.

Victor stood speechless with the three-ruble note in his hand.



Victor never once thought of Dasha when he was at work next morning. He seldom let his mind wander when he was at the working face. He might joke and fool about with his mates on the way to the pit, in the cage and even going inbye, when he lived up to his reputation of gay young spark. At the working face, however, he became a different man. The compressed air rushing into his pneumatic hammer seemed to shake up the man as well as the instrument. Victor became at once serious and older.

"Uncle Victor! The timber's all set," reported Pasha Stepanchikov, the apprentice, an undersized dreamy lad.

"Good," he answered curtly. He hung up his lamp, and looked around. "How's the air?" he demanded.

He fell to work as if life outside were meaningless, and the only real life was here, at the seam. Here he got to grips with it, devoured it.

Victor connected the hammer to the delivery hose with a swift jerky movement and snapped on the cock of the pressure duct, as if he needed that air himself, couldn't breathe without it. He pressed the rubber hose with his fingers and felt the air running in with a springy flow, like hot blood coursing through one's veins. The rubber, charged with power, instantly grew hard to the touch. And then, suddenly, the hammer quivered, sprang to eager life. The hammer itself now dragged Victor to the coal, flung him into the battle. Obedient to its imperious call, the hewer furiously attacked the age-old stratum, gnawing at it, bringing it down, down, down. . . .

To Victor the pneumatic hammer was not a mere work tool, a simple instrument by which the miner earned his livelihood, but an almost human workmate, like a pony to the putter, a dog to the hunter, or a boat to the fisherman.

It was five years since he had first seen a pneumatic hammer. Soon after his return to the Steep Maria, Andrei had solemnly brought him into the working where Uncle Prokop was in charge. Andrei had been excited; he wanted his comrade to be impressed by the pneumatic hammer.

"May we have a look at your equipment, Prokop Maximovich?" he had asked, and the miner had readily consented. He was rather fond of showing off his "machinery." Just at the moment he was engaged in timbering. His hammer lay on the floor. It didn't look like a hammer at all to Victor—it was more like a drill or a sub-machine gun. In fact it looked more like a weapon than a tool. Victor picked it up. It was heavy, much heavier than an or-

dinary pick, but Victor liked the feel of it none the less. Another thing he liked about it was that it was clean, despite the coal-dust flying about. He drew the palm of his hand across the metal, and the feel of it was good.

All of a sudden the hammer jumped in his hands like a living thing. Uncle Prokop, on the sly, had turned on the air, and Victor happening to press the release, the thing jarred him.

"That horse of mine's a kicker, eh?" Uncle Prokop said with a chuckle, watching the instrument jiggling in Victor's hands. The lad was hard put to it to keep his grip on the thing, but he did not give in. He pressed harder. "Go on, kick away! There isn't a horse that can't be saddled."

Indeed, Victor felt as if he were holding a high-strung stallion by the bridle, and it was snorting and plunging wildly in an attempt to break away before he could curb it with an iron hand, swing himself on to its back and gallop off with a wild whoop.

"Uncle Prokop!" Victor had said, lowering the hammer. "Take me on as a learner, will you?"

"A learner?" the miner said in surprise. "Why, I thought you didn't like to learn. Too proud."

"Take me on!" Victor repeated his request in a low voice.

Thus Uncle Prokop's "university" came into being. It was quite a topic among the miners at the time.

"Are you charging your students a monthly fee or do they pay you for each lesson?" Prokop's father-in-law, a sarcastic little old fellow, asked him one Saturday evening over the supper.

Prokop merely laughed good-humouredly by way of reply.

"Don't tell me you're doing it for nothing!" his father-in-law said in mock amazement. "Well, I'll be damned! Just laying yourself out for a mere thank you?"

"I don't even need the thank you."

"You won't get it either. The young folks are an ungrateful lot, my dear chap. They'll take all you give 'em and beat you at your own game, and make a laughing-stock of you into the bargain."

"I don't mind if they beat me," Prokop said carelessly, knocking out his pipe. "What difference does it make—their coal or mine—it all goes into the same furnace."

Prokop, however, could give his "students" attention only at odd moments, since they were working at different benches. But Vorozhtsov, the Secretary of the mine's Party organization, stepped in. At that time new machines were arriving almost daily at the Steep Maria—now a compressor, now a batch of brand-new pneumatic hammers or an electric locomotive. The Steep Maria seams were passing over to machine extraction one after another. Coal-hewers skilled in the handling of pneumatic hammers were badly needed. Men with the necessary qualifications were scarce. People had to be trained urgently. And so, on Vorozhtsov's advice, Uncle Prokop was temporarily appointed instructor and given five pupils, among them Victor and Andrei. In the day-time they took practical lessons in the pit under the instruction of Uncle Prokop, and in the evenings studied theory at training classes, likewise organized on Vorozhtsov's advice. Here the young miners studied the working parts of the hammer, maintenance of equipment and the rudiments of coal-winning—things, in short, which later became known as the miner's proficiency minimum.

Victor, like Andrei, attended the classes regularly, but "practical studies" under Uncle Prokop had a much greater appeal to him. He was eager to master the pneumatic hammer as quickly as possible and become an independent coal-hewer. Things had not gone well with him at first. This was due not to lack of zeal, as had been the case before, but rather to too much zeal and impatience.

He would throw his whole weight upon the hammer, driving the pick deep in almost up to the spring in an effort to bring down a huge chunk and excite the wonder of his instructor. But the chunk didn't fall off, and the pick either broke or got jammed so hard that Victor barely managed to pull it out.

Meanwhile Uncle Prokop looked on and chuckled.

"Greedy, eh? Trying to bring it down by brute force? That won't get you anywhere here, my lad. Got to use your brains."

He never spared Victor's feelings.

"What's the matter with your hammer today? It's more dead than alive," he would say mockingly.

"I don't think there's enough air."

"Ah, I see! Otherwise everything's in order?"

"Yes. . ." Victor answered somewhat uncertainly.

"Here, let's have your hammer! H'm, the pick's loose. And there's dirt here, see? You don't love your machine well enough, my boy!"

"I don't? Why, I—"

"Anyway, it's the wrong sort of love, not enough respect in it. It isn't oiled either, I see," Prokop went on, coolly examining the tool. "Have you got the oil-can with you?"

"Yes. . ." Victor said in confusion, handing it to him.

"H'm. . . Careless sort of love, yours is. And you expect the thing to work. What right have you to expect that? Eh? No right at all!" He cleaned and oiled the mechanism, and gave it a blowing-through with the compressed air. A miracle seemed to have happened. It came alive again and seemed prepared to give all of a thousand strokes instead of the usual seven hundred per minute.

"There. Plenty of air now!" the miner said with mock surprise. "And you said there wasn't enough. Call yourself a hewer! Here, take it!"

Victor meekly took the hammer from him.

"Feeling sore at me, eh?" Prokop said, puffing his moustaches up ferociously. "Well? Out with it! You can't fool me!"

"No, I'm not..." Victor muttered shamefacedly. "Thanks, Prokop Maximovich."

He really never took offence at his teacher. This was so unlike Victor that everyone was amazed. Sometimes, however, he complained to Svetlichny, with whom he had made friends:

"The old man doesn't like me. Hates the sight of me!" and added with a sigh: "But he's fond of Andrei."

Svetlichny merely laughed by way of reply.

"You're a sight too pampered, old chap! Always expecting people to like you for nothing. Love's a thing you've got to earn."

"But aren't I doing my level best?" Victor said dismally.

He was. And sometimes he managed to work through a whole shift without getting a reprimand, or, for that matter, a word of praise. When Prokop was there he would try to work smoothly, bearing in mind all the lessons and instructions he had received. That would go on for an hour or two, but in the end he would succumb to the wild excitement, the lust of the coal-getter. Everything, at last, would seem to be going well, and just when he had got into his stride, with the hammer working perfectly and the seam yielding to his efforts, he would drive the pick recklessly into the coal face, right into the heart of the cleavage, then jerk the hammer sideways to loosen the chunk, and the pick would smash with a snap.

And there, close behind him, came the familiar mocking voice:

"There you go again. Another one gone!"

"I can't help it—it's the picks!" Victor would answer hotly. "Poor steel."

"Poor steel? Poor miner!" his teacher would answer snappishly. "You haven't the patience of a real coal-hewer, that's your trouble." He did his best to curb the hot temper of his pupil, saying: "Your character needs improving! Make good as a man, and you'll make good as a miner—not before." He was like a shrewd musketry instructor combating the weaknesses of recruits—the nervous "blinker" and the impatient "jerker."

Victor was a "jerker," and Uncle Prokop knew it. Victor knew it, too, and cursed himself for it. He realized now that coal was not to be won by brute force or brava-do. He had seen that in others. There were some brawny fellows whose coal came away in dribblets, whereas the slight but dexterous Mitya Zakorko got his down in cascades. But then Mitya was the son and grandson of miners, and he had the "feel" of coal. There were tricks of the trade too, Victor realized, and he was eager to master those tricks.

One day Uncle Prokop himself revealed to him one of the secrets of coal-getting. He did it quite simply and made no mystery about it. He willingly shared the secrets of the trade with the boys. This particular "secret" consisted of cutting a notch at the bottom of the seam and setting the props not flush with the face but about a hand-breadth away from it.

"D'you get the idea?" he asked Victor.

"Ye-e-s—I mean, no. I don't quite get it," his pupil confessed.

"You just look! I've cut a notch at the bottom of the seam. What have I done that for? To leave the coal overhanging without support. See? That makes the coal more workable; it must come down whether it wants to or not. What's more, the roof presses down on it just in the spot where I have to cut it. I haven't set the props flush, as you notice, which means I'm allowing the roof to press

down. It's doing half the work for me, see!" He winked slyly. "Here, take the hammer, have a try."

The hewing was much easier, Victor found to his surprise. The coal became more workable and came down more readily. And when Victor, gaining confidence, started working the "stream," it came down in a mass, the way it did with Mitya Zakorko.

"Now, that's something!" Victor cried in delight.

He was elated. Not only because the coal was easier to hew and came down in a merry, noisy, festive stream, and the pick didn't break or get jammed, but because the profession that Victor had chosen without great thought suddenly struck him in a new light; what had seemed dreary, repetitive work revealed to him so much that was new, amazing, thrilling and even mysterious that it took his breath away. "So that's what it is!" Victor thought excitedly, as he went on bringing down the coal. "Then there are secrets? I knew it!"

And now Victor was free to master all those secrets and mysteries! He could learn them from people "in the know," and Uncle Prokop himself would freely share his knowledge with him. He could find out many things for himself, too—all you had to do was use your brains, study the seam you were working, find out how it was built up, which way it ran and so on. One could find out all the whims and crotchets of roof and floor. One could do a lot! "I've had a good schooling. I'm not a fool. And Uncle Prokop will help me." He looked at the old man with gratitude and affection.

Uncle Prokop merely grinned behind his moustache. He was pleased. That day he did not find fault with Victor. But neither did he praise him. He felt that praise was bad for Victor.

Only once, long afterwards, did he go back on that rule. Lost in admiration of Victor's really beautiful

work at the face, he was unable to suppress a grunt of amazement.

"Look at that! I do believe Victor's making a go of it. Well, I never!"

But Victor was no longer a pupil. He was a miner of some repute now, and could take his hammer to pieces and assemble it again with the speed and efficiency of an expert machine-gunner at assembling drill. No one at the Steep Maria could do that quicker than Victor, not even Mitya Zakorko. People used to come specially to the classes to admire Victor's skill. And everyone was amazed. Victor became a celebrity. True, his fame was confined to his own locality, but still, it was fame.

It was about that time that a competition started between Victor and Mitya Zakorko, a competition which was to last for years and which, from the outset, assumed the character of a keen sports contest, for both the contestants were young, hot-blooded lads. The whole colliery followed the duel. Not even Uncle Prokop, for all his affected indifference and his oft-repeated "What's the odds? It all goes into one furnace!" could remain calm. After all, Victor was his pupil, and Mitya Zakorko got his training from his old Uncle Treukhov; Mitya's father had been killed by a fall of roof back in 1923.

This rivalry took complete possession of Victor. Starting in the pit, it spilled over into the colliery club where both Victor and Mitya belonged to the dramatic society, into the Komsomol political school, the stadium and even the dance hall. They were like game cocks—one with flaming red hair, the other with a black mop—trying to out-dance one another. They even tried once to out-drink one another in public, but neither was a "seasoned" drinker.

Meanwhile time flowed on imperceptibly. A year flew past, then a second. . . . And just as imperceptibly, they grew from boyhood into manhood, from timid tyros into

confident miners. Their friendship with all the people of the colliery ripened in the same way. With some of them they made close friends whose homes they could visit in the evenings. They were accepted, too, in the course of time by the veterans of the Steep Maria, who now felt that the lads had come to stay, and who began to accept them as regular miners, almost natives of the town. The old women got busy looking out for prospective brides for them. Credit was opened to the lads in the barber's shop, the dining-room and even the club refreshment room until the next pay-day. They now had their permanent seats in the colliery dining-room at the "Shock-workers' table." And when the T. U. Committee distributed shopping vouchers or extra ration coupons the boys were never overlooked. They stood up for their own rights now, especially Victor; the office staff was a little afraid of him and tried to avoid argument with him. Steadily, imperceptibly, our lads became part and parcel of the mine's permanent and reliable nucleus, and like Uncle Prokop, they looked with disdain on the "protoplasm"—the drifters and seasonal workers. They cherished the reputation of the Steep Maria, took a lively interest in its affairs, and did not think so often as before of the Psyol and Chibiryaki. They called themselves Donbas men now, not Poltavians, and were proud of it, proud of being Donbas miners, front-line fighters of the first five-year plan.

Great changes had taken place in each of them since they had come out here to the Steep Maria, but the boys themselves hardly noticed them, or rather gave them no thought. They gave them no thought because such changes do not take place suddenly—they come about gradually, imperceptibly, drop by drop every day in the busy round of daily joys and sorrows. All they remembered were such milestones as the departure of a comrade, someone's marriage or death.

One such event in the life of the boys was at "Uncle Onisim's Hostel," when Sergei Ocheretin suddenly announced to his mates:

"Well, boys, this is good-bye to Sergei Ocheretin's single-blessedness! My goose is cooked! I'm getting married!"

"No, really!" everyone gasped. "Who is she?"

But Sergei merely waved his hand with a hopeless gesture, and everyone understood that he was marrying Nastya, with whom he had had a long, and, as he expressed it, "terrific" affair. The boys knew Nastya as the brawny lass from the lamp cabin, a regular fiend for work, and something of a "terror" even to the chiefs.

"Oh, she'll take you in hand now proper, Nastya will!" Victor said sympathetically.

"She will," Sergei ruefully agreed.

"Whose idea is it, marrying so early?"

"Hers," sighed Sergei, his curly head drooping, and everyone laughed.

A stag-party was held to celebrate the occasion. The boys put out on the table all that remained of their rations, and the feast, if not a rich one, was at least a merry one. Sergei at first bewailed his fate, but suddenly he struck an attitude.

"It makes my heart bleed, boys, to see the lonely lives you are living!" He glanced at the iron army cots and added: "So uncomfortable!"

The boys yelled with laughter. Sergei, the herd-boy, talking about comfort! He was not at all put out, however, and said more importantly than ever:

"Well, boys, as soon as Nastya and I fix up our little home, come along and see us. Don't stand on ceremony!"

On Sunday morning Nastya came to the hostel in person and, ignoring the mocking looks of the boys, took possession of Sergei and his belongings. They went out

with their arms around each other, Nastya carrying her husband's box. The boys were amazed to see how tender and soft-spoken she was with Sergei.

"Perhaps it is the real thing with them?" Malchenko sighed meditatively.

Shortly after this, Volodya Osadchy married, too, and left the hostel. He married a young and pretty medical assistant from a neighbouring colliery and got a transfer to work there. His wife had a little house left her by her father, a former mine surveyor.

The boys were sorry to part with Volodya whom they all liked. But Uncle Onisim consoled them:

"Never mind, lads! The way I look at it, marriage is a good thing for keeping men on the job. Don't you think so? If I had my way I'd marry off all the pit boys to Donbas girls, keep 'em from running about."

"And what if a man marries a Donbas girl and takes her away?" Svetlichny asked slyly.

"I'd have him shot! Shot on the spot!" Uncle Onisim retorted fiercely.

Gleb Vasilchikov, the Kharkov boy, left the mine, too. He was going on account of his health, he explained embarrassedly to the boys who listened to him in silent scorn as he fussed about with his suit-case, evidently in a hurry to put an end to the painful scene. No one went to see him off.

And then one day Svetlichny announced he was going away. He came into the hostel looking unusually excited and festive, and cheerfully cried almost before he was in the room:

"Well, boys! You'll have to elect a new Komsomol organizer. I'm going away to study!" And he shook his papers in the air.

No doubt he expected noisy congratulations, good wishes, eager questions—anything, in short, but the utter silence with which his news was greeted. The whole

Komsomol crew was here in this gloomy barrack-like room. And the whole crew was silent. Svetlichny looked at the boys in surprise, then frowned.

A heated dispute started. Victor argued that Svetlichny's departure—even though he was going to study—was a disguised form of desertion.

"The main thing these days is coal! You can worry about your education afterwards!" he said hotly. And everyone sided with Victor, looking at Svetlichny almost with animosity.

Svetlichny made no attempt to vindicate himself.

"That's right!" he said mockingly, when Victor had shouted himself out. "That's exactly what our half-red 'specialist,' Kazimir Savelievich, thinks."

"What's Kazimir Savelievich got to do with it?" Victor said blankly.

"A lot. That's just the way he argues, 'You miners,' he says, 'are the common herd. Your job is to cut coal, but I'm an old engineer from the top shelf and my job's to boss you and run things at the mine the way I want 'em. And you'll eat humble pie for a long time yet, for you haven't got the specialist's knowledge.' That's how he argues."

"We can cut coal without the Kazimir Savelieviches, if it comes to that!" Victor cried excitedly.

"You think so?"

"We can!"

"And direct mining work as well?"

Victor did not answer.

"Perhaps you know geology too? And the principles of ventilation?" Svetlichny paused for a reply, then made a contemptuous gesture. "No, we've had enough of it! Time we had our own intelligentsia."

"A-ah!" Victor yelled jubilantly, as though he had been waiting for those very words. "So you're pushing up into the intelligentsia, eh?"

"I am," Svetlichny answered calmly. "Trying my hardest! And I'll be damned if I don't pull you fellows in by the scruff of your necks! What do Comrade Stalin's words about the Bolsheviks mastering techniques and becoming specialists mean to you? Maybe you think they're not meant for you at all?"

"But what about the coal? Who's going to work the coal?" persisted Malchenko. It was a passionate, almost boyish dispute, a dispute that no longer concerned only Fyodor Svetlichny and his destiny, but the destiny of our whole generation. It was a dispute which life had already settled. The truth was on Svetlichny's side, and he knew it.

At parting he embraced Victor, pulled his shaggy head down and whispered into his ear:

"I hate to leave you, you blighter! I'll be waiting for you at the Workers' Faculty."

And in a year's time, in the autumn of 1932, four Steep Maria lads, one of them the once-stubborn Malchenko, went away to study. Andrei and Victor saw them off. They stood gazing thoughtfully down the track long after the train had been swallowed up in the dark night.

Then Andrei said tentatively:

"Well, what do you say now, Victor?"

"About what?"

"Well, about studying, say."

"It's a good idea," Victor said with a careless shrug. "Why do you ask?"

"Oh, I was just asking."

At that time the competition between Victor and Mitya Zakorko had reached its highest pitch, and Victor could not and did not want to leave the mine. In the spring of 1933 Andrei dared not even hint at going away to study—the Donbas had slipped back pretty sharply the winter before.

It had been an unusually severe winter with stinging frosts, snow-drifts, blizzards and such fierce driving

winds as the Donets steppe, inured to foul winter weather as it was, had never witnessed before. There were days when it was impossible to stand on the waste dumps, let alone work on them. The icy wind froze people to the marrow. Trainloads of pit props stood stranded in the deep snow on the connecting tracks. All the railway lines were blocked up with frost-bound coal trains. The Steep Maria was all but cut off from the outside world.

The mine was simply panting for timber. There was a shortage of empties too. The air pressure was bad. Ice formed at the pit mouth, and haulage was impeded. Every day there was some break-down, now on the compressor, now on the air-pressure duct or in the engine room. But that was the fault of neither the snow-drifts nor the frosts.

As is usual in such cases, all the mine's hidden troubles broke out into open sores. It was discovered that the Steep Maria had no directing hand, or rather it had too many of them. The colliery office was like a swarming beehive, filled with a milling crowd of people, unshaved, worried, with colds in their heads, muffled up in scarves, all shouting hoarsely into telephones, issuing orders, making excuses, swearing, pleading and threatening; but none of them could find time to go down to the pit and try to help matters on the spot.

Victor felt the difficulties of that winter very badly, both on his own and the mine's account. The fact that Mitya Zakorko was not finding things any easier could no longer console him. He and Mitya kicked up a row in the overman's cubbyhole: "Why don't you do something about the air pressure? It's a disgrace!" The air-pressure system was in poor condition. Air leaked out through numerous chinks and couplings. The leaks whistled in all the galleries, and only a fraction of the pressure reached the hammers. It merely guggled weakly and thin'y in the hose pipes like water. The more hard-boiled miners remarked with cheerless humour: "Help yourself and air

will help you!" and went down to the pit with the out-dated picks. The men whose duty it was to introduce mechanization in mine working had neither the heart nor the aptitude for the job. They had already been dubbed "anti-mechanizers," and at the spontaneous meetings that sprang up during roll-call, hot-headed Volodya Struzhnikov, the Komsomol Secretary, demanded that the "wrath of the masses" should be raised against them.

This wrath blazed fiercely in Victor, and still more intensely if less demonstratively in Andrei. It was a harsh resentment against everything that hindered the work of the Steep Maria and, consequently, hindered Andrei Voronko and Victor Abrosimov. After work, still clad in their pit clothes and merely discarding their helmets for warm caps with ear-flaps, they joined the rest of the colliery Komsomol youth in clearing the pit head tracks of snow. They went out on endless "sorties," "mechanization patrols," and "raids"—military terms came readily to the tongue in those days—volunteered to act as "pickets" at night to argue with "deserters" on the roads and at the railway stations, and urge them to go back to the mine. At that time drifters and shirkers were the bane of the Steep Maria, and if Victor had had his way he would have wrung the necks of all of them. Those drifters wandered back and forth across the Donets steppe from mine to mine all the winter. They roamed about, not knowing themselves what they wanted, but everywhere they received food coupons, working kit, and lodgings. In the spring, when hundred-mouthed rumour brought news of unheard-of collective-farm prosperity from all over the country, this flotsam surged back to the villages. The pits became almost deserted, and the regular miners—among them Andrei and Victor—had to do the work of ten men each.

"Headquarters knows nothing about our troubles!" old Prokop used to say, shaking his head. "The office

writes, of course, but it all looks smooth on paper. Paper can sometimes screen the sun from you."

But on April 9th it became known at the Steep Maria that the day before the Central Committee of the Party and the Council of People's Commissars had adopted a special resolution concerning the work of the Donbas coal industry. The resolution, signed by Stalin and Molotov, was read out at roll-call by the new Secretary of the Colliery Party Committee—Vorozhtsov was no longer at the mine.

"The Council of People's Commissars and the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union," the Secretary began to read slowly in the hushed stint room, while Kandybin, a timberer who was hard of hearing, elbowed his way forward and sat down on the floor right in front of the Secretary—"establish the fact that despite the steady increase in technical equipment and supplies the plan of coal production in the Donbas is not being fulfilled and coal production instead of increasing has decreased. . . . The C.P.C. and the C.C. of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union consider that this disgraceful backsliding is mainly due to utterly ineffective and bureaucratic methods of administration still existing in the coal industry. . . ."

"Quite right!" someone murmured behind Victor. But Victor did not look round. He was listening intently. First in astonishment—"Why, it's been specially written for our Steep Maria!" Then with joy—"Ah, so they know all about it up there? That's good!" Then anxiously—"But how are we going to crawl out of this hole, how?" And finally with delight when the resolution, in the same blunt clear terms, told how the Donbas was to make good the shameful deficit.

Yes, those who had signed that resolution knew perfectly well what was going on at the Donbas mines that anxious winter! They knew much more about it than did

Victor Abrosimov, the Steep Maria coal miner. And most important of all, they saw and pointed out the reasons and roots of the trouble. There had been times when Victor, worn out by endless bother with the faulty hoses, squabbles and bickerings with the fitters, mechanics, deputies and undermanagers, had cried out in desperation: "A holy mess everywhere, can't make head or tail of it!" "And now," he thought, listening to the government's decision, "they've put their finger on it!" Yes, they had found and pointed out the culprits, designated them anti-mechanizers and bureaucrats, who had "failed to grasp this radical change in the conditions of coal production brought about by mechanization, and continue to regard the mine as a place of work for ordinary earth-diggers at a time when the mine has become a real industrial plant equipped with complex machinery."

"That nails 'em pretty strong!" Victor thought with glee, as he listened to the stern words of the resolution concerning the culprits responsible for the unprecedented drift of labour in the Donbas, where "a considerable part of the workers and administrative personnel, if not the majority, spend most of their time roaming 'tirelessly' from mine to mine, from mine to village, and from village to mine, leaving the most honest and permanent workers and employees of the Donbas coal-fields to bear the brunt of the work in coal production." The resolution demanded that a stop be put to this state of affairs, that each pit should be put in order, taken in hand by a single, efficient manager, that wage levelling be done away with, that the best economy workers and engineers be transferred to the mines from the Trusts and other offices, that a new wave of socialist competition and shock-work be started among the workers, and that all necessary steps be taken to ensure the fulfilment of the coal production plan.

"Well, boys," cried old Treukhov, Mitya Zakorko's teacher, when the Secretary had finished reading, "sit tight now! Everything will come out all right now." Old Treukhov, as always, expressed the thoughts uppermost in all the men's minds.

Several days later an all-Donbas conference of colliery shock-workers was held in Stalino. Prokop Maximovich Lesnyak, Mitya Zakorko and Victor attended the conference as delegates from the Steep Maria. Victor had never been to such an important rally before. The local newspaper called the conference a rally of the entire coal-mining advance guard, the pick of the Donbas coal-fields. Victor, reading it, felt flattered. "So I'm one of the advance guard now," he thought with pride. Uncle Prokop pointed out the Donbas celebrities to him and Mitya—colliery managers, engineers, coal-hewers, putters and the famous Koroleva, an active member of the miners' wives' movement. Koroleva was a thin little old woman in a long black skirt, high boots and a kerchief tied under her chin. She was nothing much to look at, and moved among the delegates with timid reserve, trying to keep in the background.

"You wait till she speaks!" Uncle Prokop told Victor with a chuckle. "She's a regular terror! Everyone'll get it hot from her, don't you worry—the big ones and the little ones alike." Then suddenly he sighed. "My mother was like her, too—wasn't afraid of anybody."

Nikita Izotov went past, tall, broad-shouldered and straight-set. Victor recognized him and respectfully made way. He watched him pass down the aisle through the whole hall, walking with a confident step as if he were going inbye through old familiar pit galleries. Some men, probably press reporters or Trust workers, immediately darted up to him and began speaking hurriedly to him all together. He stood calmly and patiently listening with his thumbs stuck into the belt of his semi-military tunic,

his fair, close-cropped head towering above the crowd. "Yes, that's the real advance guard!" Victor thought with involuntary envy.

The Central Committee of the Party was represented at the conference by Lazar Moiseyevich Kaganovich. The delegates greeted his appearance warmly. Victor had not seen Kaganovich before. It was flattering to have such a man come to their conference, but awkward that he had come at a time when their house was in such disorder.

Prokop Lesnyak experienced the same feeling of awkwardness. "Y-e-es. We make a poor show just now," he muttered. "More's the pity." Many of the delegates felt the same way, especially the old men. One spry old fellow came up to Uncle Prokop and said without any preamble: "So that's how it is, old chap! Everyone's going to get what's coming to him!" and mopped his bald head. His scalp was traced with blue lines where coal-dust had got into now-healed wounds. "Must have been caught in a bad explosion or a fall, poor beggar!" thought Victor.

"Yes. Everyone will reap what he has sown," Uncle Prokop said grimly.

"And we deserve it, too. To think we have come to this!" sighed the little old man. "The Donbas always set the pace, and now—"

"Oh, this is only temporary," said Prokop, and they all moved off towards the exit.

Victor thought that Uncle Prokop and the spry old man were old acquaintances, and he was astonished to learn in the delegates' dining-room that the two had never met before. The stranger was Kolesnikov, a coal-hewer from the Young Communard Colliery. Victor had heard about him. Like Uncle Prokop, he enjoyed a reputation for teaching novices the art of coal-cutting, and had been mentioned in the newspapers.

On the way Uncle Prokop suddenly let fly at Mitya Zakorko for no apparent reason. Mitya's sole offence was

that he had lingered too long at a soft-drink kiosk, where he had fallen into conversation with the pretty girl behind the counter. Uncle Prokop was black as thunder when they arrived in the dining-room, and did not eat anything.

"Why don't you eat, Prokop Maximovich?" Mitya said timidly, feeling innocently guilty. "The grub's not bad."

"Do you deserve that grub?"

"What d'you mean?" Mitya said, sounding hurt. "I'm a shock-worker. I do my job."

"There you are!" Prokop said to Kolesnikov in a bitter tone. "They have no conscience at all, these young people!"

"Never mind!" Kolesnikov answered indulgently. "What can you expect, they're young and spoilt—"

"They're not spoilt, they're just shameless!" Uncle Prokop growled. "They have no conscience, no shame, no memory. We old men never forget the reputation of our Donbas! That's why we feel ashamed now."

His speech at the conference was couched in the same terms. Mounting the platform, he stood there frowning and silent, then said quietly:

"Shame!" He looked into the hushed hall and repeated again: "Shame!" Obviously he had come up on to the platform with that single feeling, expressed by that single word. "Shame!" he uttered for the third time, now loudly and vehemently, and Victor thought he could see tears glistening in the old man's eyes. "The government grudges nothing to us miners!" Prokop continued. "We get a kilo of bread in these difficult times of food shortage. And what do we do to earn that precious kilogram, I ask you? Shame!" He suddenly faced round towards the presidium. "You can tell the Government that, Lazar Moiseyevich. We miners realize ourselves what a shame it is!"

"I will," said Kaganovich.

Victor intended taking the floor, too. Meanwhile he was nervously jotting down notes, waiting and listening to what others were saying. Nikita Izotov was given the floor. He was apparently accustomed to speaking in public. He stepped up confidently, placed his elbows on the rostrum, then leaned his big body forward and said:

"Let's do a bit of plain speaking. I'm an old miner and you are old miners. We understand each other." And he started a frank examination of the Donbas' production troubles.

Others followed him with similarly hard-hitting, business-like speeches. That quiet old fellow, Kolesnikov, spoke boldly and sharply, greatly to Victor's astonishment. Sasha Stepanenko, a Komsomol boy and Izotov's pupil, spoke fervently. Then Koroleva, the old woman, went up towards the platform but spoke from the floor, gripping the edge of the dais with one hand. She spoke fluently, without any notes, in a melodious and surprisingly resonant voice, while she cleft the air with choppy motions of her right hand as though she were shredding cabbage.

Kaganovich addressed the conference with a long speech. It made a deep impression on Victor, especially when he declared: "The leading men of the Donbas, the heroes of coal, have not yet succeeded in leading the rest of the miners along with them. Your task as shock-workers is to become the organizers and to get all the others to follow your lead." Victor pondered those words a good deal. He wanted to come out before all these people and take upon himself some daring obligation such as no one else had yet ventured upon, but he couldn't think of anything special and did not take the floor. Afterwards, when the conference was over, he regretted it. The Steep Maria delegates returned home highly stimulated; even Uncle Prokop cheered up.

"Never mind!" he said, twirling his moustaches. "The Donbas will win back its reputation. We miners are not the kind of people to shuffle along at the tail end. Why didn't you boys say something at the conference? Scared?" he asked good-humouredly.

"I'll have my say in the pit. I'll say it with coal!" Mitya Zakorko answered jauntily. "I'll challenge Victor. Take me on, Victor?"

"Like a shot!" answered Victor. "Only my wager is this: which of us trains more apprentices, and not just cuts more coal."

"What d'you mean?" Zakorko said, puzzled.

Uncle Prokop was delighted.

"Now that's an idea, Victor! Go ahead with it!" he said eagerly, and gave a complacent laugh. "And your pupils will be my grandchildren, so to speak."

At home the delegates were obliged to make their report to the miners.

Victor began his speech: "I, as delegate to the all-Donets conference of mining shock-workers. . . ." But there was not a trace of boasting in his voice, or in him. There, at the meeting, he pledged himself to train five coal-hewers, and challenged Mitya Zakorko to equal or better him.

Directly after the conference big changes took place at the Steep Maria. A new colliery manager arrived—a big, burly, silent man. Uncle Prokop said of him with respect: "An old miner!" Soon everyone at the mine was calling the new manager "the Old Man." A new chief engineer arrived as well—Pyotr Fomich Glushkov. He too was an old man, but a young engineer. Things at the Steep Maria began to look up. The star was lit again over the pit head. The switching on was entrusted to the best coal-hewer in the mine—Victor Abrosimov. By that time Abrosimov was a Party member. A year previously, on International Youth Day, Andrei and Victor had "graduated" from the Komsomol organization into the Party.

Prokop Lesnyak had given them his recommendation. He gave it with a solemnity befitting the occasion, and his dignified mien as he put on his silver-rimmed spectacles and signed the paper seemed to say: "I hope you realize the kind of Party I'm endorsing you for. You'd better!"

The lads were enrolled by a unanimous vote, but they were extremely nervous, especially when Victor started giving a frank account of his early lapse. And afterwards, returning home through the dark streets, subdued and silent, they thought with deep emotion of this great event in their lives.

"Well, and how are we going to carry on now?" Andrei at last broke the silence.

"Work!" answered Victor. "We used to cut coal the Komsomol way, now we've got to cut it the Party way!"

"And what about learning? Aren't we going away to study?"

"That chance won't run away from us."

"At least let us join the evening school then."

"All right!" Victor promptly agreed.

He agreed only because Andrei wanted it. At that time he had no thought of becoming an engineer or a technician. Why should he? The pit was good enough for him. Things were taking a livelier turn every day. However, in deference to Andrei, he started attending technical school in the evenings. It bored him at first, then he got used to it. But his heart lay where his work lay, at the coal-face.

During these past five years at the Steep Maria he had lived the full and satisfying life of a coal-hewer. He had cut lively coal and mushy coal, and "fialka," as the miners called the wet, heavy seam. He had worked on the "Arshinka" and "Devyatka" seams, on the flinty "Diamond" and the capricious, almost dancing "Mazurka," and the tricky, shiftY "Nikanor" and "Skimpy" seams, and on the "Salty" and the "Stinker" nicknamed so on account of

its acrid smell of hydrogen sulphide -and on the "Limy" seam where the roof was good and strong and where the miners liked to work, and on the "Beral" where the roof was insecure. How many miles of underground passages he had driven with his pneumatic hammer in those five years! How many thousands of tons of coal he had given to the surface!

In the summer of 1935 he worked with Uncle Prokop in a new level No. 640, in the third eastern seam.

* 5 *

Pasha Stepanchikov, Victor's pupil, was fond of boasting to the kids in his street.

"D'you know who I'm working with, boys? With Abrosimov, Victor Fyodorovich. Put that in your pipe! And d'you know how Uncle Victor hews coal? Slashes it, like Budyonny with his sword! You ought to see the fist he has! Whew! A real sledge-hammer. Everyone's afraid of him at the mine, but he's not even afraid of the Old Man. That's the kind of fellow I'm working with!"

At the coal-face he followed his teacher's work with rapturous eyes.

"Oh, Uncle Victor!" he murmured ecstatically. "You're a wizard with coal. I once saw a sword fight at the circus; it was thrilling, but you beat it hollow!"

Victor grinned. He liked praise, even if it came from Pasha Stepanchikov. He felt strong as a giant. Once he had only dreamt of setting a record of double output in a single shift. Now he could give even more, he thought with annoyance, if only he had more elbow room. What was an eight-metre bench to him! He had finished it well before lunch-time and was compelled to stop.

"So that's that, Pasha!" he said, switching off the hammer. He watched the last chunks rolling down, then

folded his hands behind his head, stretched his whole body and added drearily: "Might as well start propping."

He did not like to do the propping, considering this the job of a deputy's mate and not of a hewer. Why the devil should he have to mess about pegging up the roof, while the air hammer lay idle on the floor during half the shift!

Suddenly, on the spur of the moment, he said:

"I could handle the whole face by myself. . . ."

He said it impulsively, for the unspent energy of the inspired hewer coursed intoxicatingly through his veins. A shadow of doubt on the face of his staunch apprentice made him frown.

"You don't believe me, Pasha?" he demanded ominously.

Pasha did not. He believed his favourite hero capable of any exploit, however fantastic. He believed Uncle Victor could scatter a hundred miners in a fight with his left hand. He believed Uncle Victor could meet Shubin himself and conquer him in a duel out in the farthest workings where Pasha dared not even show his nose. Poor Pasha would have believed almost any cock-and-bull story; but he was a pit boy, grandson and son of miners, and he simply could not believe that even Uncle Victor could do the whole eighty metres in a single shift.

He stammered in confusion:

"Oh, Uncle Victor! But it can't be done. . . . You want to- . . ."

"Never mind!" Victor checked him brusquely. "Set the props!" He was completely absorbed in his work again.

There were still two more hours to go until the next shift took over, but there was nothing more for Victor to do in the working.

"Well, Pasha," he said with a smile, "you're damned lucky to be working with a hewer like me. You can go out-bye now and take it easy—go for a walk. I'll drop in on Andrei."

He collected his tools, packed them into his kit and crawled to the bench where Andrei was working. Andrei was still timbering. Victor, without saying a word, lay down right on the coal. Why did he feel so blue, he wondered. Was it just boredom?

There came a soft tapping of Andrei's axe, as he knocked a slab under the overhanging roof. Andrei would soon be finishing his stint, too, and they would have nothing more to do in the pit. They'd have to go to the top. Well, all the better; there wouldn't be such a crush at the change-house. They had done their stints, and even more. A good day's work. Could look men in the face without feeling ashamed. Yet the thought of going up to the surface brought a twinge of shame.

"It isn't our fault!" Victor thought, as if he were trying to excuse himself. "Give us more scope!"

He lay down on his back and threw his arms wide. Ah, it was fine, say what you like! The coal was cool and moist, and you could imagine yourself lying in the steppe at night on the damp grass, or on the wet sand by the Psyol. . . . The roof overhead became a dark, dark sky, and the light of the miner's lamp the glow of a distant star. One day people would fly to the stars! If he had been an airman, Victor mused, he'd certainly have wanted to join the inter-planetary service. No such thing yet? Well, there would be! But just now, as a miner, it was more fitting for him to strive inward rather than upward. It would be a fine thing to sink a shaft right to the centre of the earth! People said there was nothing but a molten mass there. Interesting. People would attain to everything in time—the stars, the centre of the earth and complete happiness. That would probably come about under world commu-

nism. "I wonder whether Andrei and I will live to see that time? Well, if not world communism, at least the beginning?"

"Communism!" he growled. "Here's two great louts loafing about doing nothing. Galleries full of mud. Tubeways out of order."

"What?" said Andrei.

"Nothing. Just talking to myself."

No, better not to think about it. "What the hell!" he suddenly got angry with himself. "Bothering my head! It's the administration's job to worry about that. It's not my funeral! I'm a miner, and a miner thinks of his bath and borshch." But he could no longer keep his mind off this important train of thought.

Andrei finished timbering and laid the axe aside with regret.

"Ouf!" he said, stretching. "Feel like I just got started."

He did not work as fast as Victor, but he, too, felt cramped for working space. He gave one and a half to twice the rate of output without any special effort, and fulfilled his stint long before the whistle.

"Let's go outbye, shall we?" he suggested uncertainly, and started getting his tools together. He had the same tool kit as Victor. Vera had sewn and presented the bags to them. Andrei always thought of her when he put his tools away, and each time with annoyance. "What the blazes does she want? Why doesn't she leave me alone!" But he used the bag nevertheless.

"Well, outbye?" he repeated.

"Oh, all right," Victor answered after a brief pause. "Look here, Andrei," he said suddenly, "could you smash down the whole wall in a single shift?"

"All by myself?" Andrei queried in astonishment. "Never!"

"Wait a minute! Say the timber was prepared beforehand, laid out in the benches, with plenty of air and everything else got ready—could you manage then?"

Andrei turned it over in his mind.

"No!" he said, shaking his head. "I doubt it!" He laughed. "What crazy ideas you get, Victor!" Then, in his usual tone of voice: "Shall we wait for the deputy or not?"

As it happened, the deputy Makivchuk came up just then.

"Knocking off already?" he asked as usual in feigned surprise. Makivchuk's surprise, his ingratiating smile and jokes were as false as the man himself. He was a suspicious character.

He began measuring the output.

"Real top-notchers!" he exclaimed, jotting the result down in a note-book. "What do you do with all that money, boys? You don't drink."

"Better give us a longer working face instead of counting our money," Victor said gruffly. "We've no scope here!"

"Give you fellows scope and there won't be enough in the bank to pay you with," the deputy said, parrying the question. "D'you mean to say you're not making enough?"

"All you think of is money, money. . ." Victor growled. "Is money everything?"

"You bet it is!" Makivchuk said, this time with genuine astonishment. "Money's everything!"

He looked questioningly at the boys and sighed. He had long been wanting to propose a "deal" to them—to write up faked output to their account and go shares with them. The lads were shock-workers, and an extra ton or so would not rouse suspicion. But he didn't dare. "They're Party men, damn 'em. No getting round them. They might give me away!" He sighed again and crawled off.

Victor followed him with his eyes.

"Money!" he said bitterly, and even spat in disgust.

"You eat your heart out about the pit, and people like him go about saying you're out to make money."

"What d'you expect of the man, he's an ex-Petlura tyke."

"Why do they keep so-and-so's like that in the mine? It's no place for them."

They went down the gallery, where they met Uncle Prokop, the overman.

"Ah!" the old man greeted them joyfully. "Finished for the day? Fine! If all the lads were like you! As it is, some of 'em can barely manage their stints."

"Why don't you kick 'em to hell out of here!" said Victor. "And give me and Andrei two benches apiece. We'd manage it."

"Yes . . . I was thinking of that too. You fellows are high-gearred!" he said, looking affectionately at the two brawny lads. "To think that not so long ago you were nosing about the pit like blind kittens! I hear that you're first through in the change-house too, Victor. Is that true?"

"It is! I've got long arms, Uncle Prokop."

"Well, well!" the old man exclaimed.

"Will you give us two benches apiece?"

"What about putting you on level-driving? I'm a bit behindhand there."

"But we're coal getters, not drift miners. Give us more working room at the face."

Makivchuk, who had just come up, interjected slyly: "I can't understand what these people want. There's no limit to their greed."

"We're certainly not 'ration-scrourgers,'" Victor retorted. "And the likes of you will never understand what we're 'greedy' for."

"Listen to them!" snorted the deputy.

"Ration-scrourgers" was the name given during the rationing period to those at Steep Maria who hewed only enough to qualify them for worker's ration coupons. Lit-

the money was needed to buy rationed products. Afterwards, when shops selling non-rationed goods were opened at the colliery, the "scroungers" would cut a little more coal, saying, "well, that makes a bottle of vodka" or "that buys some more of my favourite sausage." Victor, however, could never think of his work in terms either of money or rations.

"Greed!" he growled, striding sure-footed through the darkness. "So that's how some people understand shock-work."

"My daughter is back. You know--Dasha!" Uncle Prokop said suddenly.

"I know, we've seen her already!" Andrei burst out.

"Of course. She told me. Why don't you boys drop in some evening?" said Prokop. "Pay a visit to our Moscow student!"

"All right," Victor said casually, "we'll drop in some day."

They took their leave of the old man and went up to the surface. The change-house was empty.

That evening Andrei, trying to sound as casual as possible, said to Victor:

"What about going to see Uncle Prokop?" He dared not say Dasha.

"Oh! To hell! with her!" said Victor. "She's too damned stuck-up."

"What makes you think so?" Andrei was up in arms.

"Thinks too much of herself. I can't stand that type! I don't like a girl to boss me about. I like to do the bossing myself, old chap."

"Why?" Andrei asked quietly.

"What d'you mean?" Victor said, astonished. "If you're a girl, be a girl. A boy's a boy. That's how I look at it. I like the quiet meek kind. Don't you?"

"I don't know," Andrei said after a perceptible pause.

They did not go to Uncle Prokop's that evening.

They stayed in the hostel. Lollid on their beds, feeling bored. They were even glad when Vera looked in. She tapped timidly on the door first, then put her head in.

"I thought I'd pop in for a minute!" she said right off, crimson with embarrassment. "You're not asleep, are you? Excuse me! Comrade Neshcheretny told me to remind you there's going to be a work conference tomorrow." The poor girl found it more difficult each time to invent an excuse for calling.

"Come in, Vera!" Victor said kindly. "Come right in. He isn't biting today."

Vera sat down on the edge of a chair right by the door, ready to take wing at any moment. She stole a furtive glance at Andrei. He seemed all right, didn't look angry. She calmed down a bit and smiled the gentle, sunny smile that came to her so easily and naturally. She belonged to the smiling kind who seldom laugh.

Why did Andrei have such a dislike for her? She was a dainty, pretty little girl—so white of skin that her hazel eyes did not seem to belong to her face. Her eyes were her most notable feature. There was little else striking about her; her unformed figure was soft and round with a promise that she would ripen into 'shapely womanhood. One could hardly call her beautiful, but she was a neat little creature with a pleasant smell of scented soap about her.

There was nothing bright or colourful about her dress either, not so much as a bow, a ribbon or a posy. She did not even wear a red kerchief, as most of the Kom-somol girls of the colliery did, but a plain white one. In this white kerchief over her golden, wheat-coloured hair, and her simple white blouse and linen skirt she looked very much like a field daisy.

You might not notice her in passing, but once you

did, you could not help smiling to her, she was so sweet and gentle. Everything about her seemed to go out trustfully to people; she was like a sunflower straining towards the sun. The women loved her, the old women doted on her, and the elderly miners called her "daughter" from the very first acquaintance.

Vera was not popular with the young lads, however. She was not the laughter-loving kind, neither pert nor tomboyish. Nor was she of the still-water kind—there was nothing secretive or disturbing about her. She was like an open book, and her girlish heart and mind were simple, clear and utterly serene.

Ever since she was a child Vera had kept house for her widowed father, and did it with the wisdom of a mature woman and the light-heartedness of a miner's little girl. She worked all day, in the office and at home, in the kitchen or in the garden, singing softly to herself when no one could hear her.

In the evenings she read the newspaper to her father and listened patiently to his comments on world affairs. She was a good listener. She knew everything that went on at the mine, and although she had never been down the pit, she shared with all the colliery people the same keen interest in production successes and failures, and was delighted when the red star shone over the pit head. She was the daughter of a miner, and promised to make a good wife to a miner. Andrei, however, did not like her, and her affection embarrassed him.

"Well, how goes it, daughter? The office still scribbling?" Victor said gaily, when Vera had sat down on the edge of her chair. He always called her "daughter," and treated her with kind indulgence, as he would a child. He was rather fond of this quiet little girl, and her naive affection for Andrei amused him.

"Scribbling away like a house on fire!" Vera answered

in the usual stock-phrase, and the two fell to chatting in a friendly way.

Andrei lay on his bed, thumbing a book. He did not mean to hurt the girl's feelings. If it had not been for her silly infatuation he would be chatting with her, too, like Victor. But that infatuation irritated him. Particularly just now. Listening to Vera's low, almost muffled voice, he could not help thinking of another voice, a gay, ringing one, and feeling sorry that he and Victor had not gone to Uncle Prokop's in that quiet happy little house under the white roof.

Uncle Onisim came in, as usual without knocking.

"Is the electricity in order?" he asked severely, to show that he had not come for nothing, and deposited himself into a chair without waiting for an answer.

He was still house-manager at the hostel, but he was accustomed to his job by now and discharged his duties with solemnity and dignity. People still kept coming and going, but Uncle Onisim was used to this perpetual flux and even felt bored when he didn't see new faces in the hostel. He still spun yarns to the novices, and crammed them with advice and edifying bits of information, and to many young miners Uncle Onisim's stories were their first mine schooling. "We've all been through Uncle Onisim's university!" Svetlichny used to say.

The pride of this "university," the secret pride of Uncle Onisim's heart, were Andrei and Victor. He seriously considered them his pupils. He loved them with the jealous love of a lonely old man, but he concealed his love from the world. Sometimes he would start lecturing them in the old way and suddenly pull himself up, recollecting that he could teach them nothing new. Times had changed, and the mine, too, was not what it had been. These youngsters could now teach him a thing or two themselves. But he refused to give in. He put on a valiant front. He did not despise mechanization and technical innova-

tions at the mine as some stiff-necked old men did; he merely appropriated them to himself, to his own generation, and refused to acknowledge them as novelties.

"We had that in our time!" he would say. "You haven't invented anything new!"

"Did you have electric locomotives, too?" Victor asked innocently.

"Electric locomotives? Phoo! I suppose you think you invented electricity, eh? The things we had—why—!"

"What things?"

"Oh, you have no idea," the old man would say irritably. "If you like to know, we had a machine even in the pub—a music machine. You just dropped a coin in the slot, and it played by itself! And at the fairs they used to have a mechanical girl on show. She could dance a waltz even—"

"You don't say!" cried Victor, trying in vain to keep a straight face.

The subject came up every time Onisim visited them. It was as though two generations of miners had met in the lists, the older to prove that it was young, the younger to prove that it was experienced.

The argument sprang up again. This time, however, Uncle Onisim had come armed cap-à-pie. One could tell that by the mischievous twinkle in his eyes.

"By the way," he said casually. "I meant to ask you all the time—do the coal-cutting machines still exist?"

"Yes, where the seams are sloping. Why?"

"You don't say?" the old man cried in amazement, shaking his head with a sly look. "Well, I never! Just think of that! And I thought you'd hit on something new."

"Why, is it old?"

"Pretty old, I should say. Invented in my day."

"I can just imagine 'em!" Victor said scornfully, although he was touched to the quick. "Wooden ones, I suppose?"

"Oh, no! Real cutting machines. The right thing," Onisim answered coolly and triumphantly. "I'll tell you what happened once. You just listen!" he addressed the company, then licked his moustache and began: "It was in 1921. Our manager at the time was—"

"Yegor Trofimovich," inserted Andrei.

"How do you know?" Uncle Onisim asked in surprise.

"All your stories begin that way."

"Do they?" The old man was flustered. After a moment's thought, he explained with a smile: "That's because I give the straight facts. You just listen. Well, spring came round, and no miners came down to work in the pit. Not a blessed soul. Yegor Trofimovich says to me, says he: 'Onisim, old chap, why don't those no-goods come to work in the mine?' And I says to him: 'Because it's spring, Yegor Trofimovich, and people are busy digging their vegetable plots.' 'Vegetable plots?' he says. 'But they're miners, what the hell do they want to dig the earth for?' It was a hungry spring that year, food was short. So folks started fending for themselves, went in for gardening. Yes. . . . The mine was in a pretty bad way. The administration put its thinking cap on and hatched a brilliant idea. 'Here is what we'll do,' they said, 'we'll dig up all their gardens for them in three days, so they can come down into the pit and not worry their heads!' That's what they did. Ploughed all the gardens up—and what do you think they did it with, eh?" He screwed up his left eye.

"With tractors, I daresay."

"You have another guess coming!" laughed the old man. "No one had the foggiest notion about tractors then." He paused, then suddenly slapped his knees, bounced up like a ball and crowed gleefully: "With coal-cutting machines! Hear that? They ploughed with cutting machines!"

"What do you mean?" Victor said, nonplussed.

"What I say. They scraped together some cutting machines—you know, those tin-potty things they had at the time—adjusted them, hitched ploughs on to them and went ahead ploughing!"

"It can't be!" Andrei shouted with a laugh. "It's impossible!"

Just then the door was flung open and a tall figure in a grey raincoat with a cap pulled low appeared in the opening. It appeared with such startling suddenness that Vera gave a little scream and covered her face with her hands. It seemed to her as if a big, grey restless bird had flown into the room.

"Look who's here!" Victor cried, amazed. "If it isn't Svetlichny!"

"No, it's not me," Svetlichny answered calmly, putting his suit-case down on the floor. "Hullo, Uncle Onisim! You still here, boys?" he asked, taking his coat off and hanging it on a nail near the door. "Time you put in some clothes racks, Uncle Onisim!"

"There. My chief critic has turned up again!" laughed the house-manager. "Let's have a look at you, at least!" He turned the boy around, then pushed him away. "Skin and bones! Come home to recover?"

"No. For practical studies."

They were all glad and deeply affected by this unexpected meeting, but there were no kisses, no embraces, nor even noisy exclamations of delight. One would think they had never parted. A miner meets joy and danger and even death itself with little show of feeling.

Svetlichny's appearance threw Vera into confusion. Not wishing to be in the way at the friends' reunion, she tried to escape unnoticed, and had already slipped through the door when Uncle Onisim stopped her.

"No you don't, daughter! Wait a minute. There's some business to attend to." He turned round and issued a peremptory command, for all the world as if he were the

commandant of a fortress. During these last five years the old man had acquired a taste for "authority." "The command is this, boys: you all sit here and wait. We'll be back in a tick! Come on, daughter, follow me—quick march!" He made a noisy exit.

"Still going strong. I see!" Svetlichny remarked with a grin. "Has he got rid of the bugs yet?" He sat down on the bed next to Andrei, and Andrei felt as if he had never parted from their old Komsomol organizer. In a minute he would turn round and demand: "Well, how's your output, Comrade? Fulfilling your plan?" But Andrei was not afraid of that question now.

Svetlichny asked instead:

"So you are still here, boys?"

"Where else should we be?"

"I thought you'd grown wiser—gone away to study."

"You can't have everyone studying!" Victor said sarcastically. "Someone's got to work the coal. You've become a real intellectual, Fyodor. God! You look like a starved rat! Not wearing specs yet? Or a hat?"

"Hat your grandmother! I ask you for the hundredth time—why don't you go and study?"

"Who, we? Hopeless cases—ignorant duffers!"

"But we *are* studying. Why should you say that?" Andrei interposed. "We're attending evening technical school!"

"A-ah! So you have grown wiser," Svetlichny said in a pleased tone. "Well, tell me about yourselves—how are you getting on, what are you doing?"

Uncle Onisim and Vera came back with vodka and snacks. The old man began fussing around at the table.

"Hi, daughter!" he commanded. "Let's have a clean cloth! Let's have flowers! See what a guest we have!" He glanced fondly at Svetlichny and threw up his hands. "Look! He's come back after all!" he cried, as if the fact

had only just dawned on him. "Come back to the mine? Eh? Well, well, that's fine!"

"Where else should I go, Uncle Onisim?" laughed Svetlichny.

"Aye, where else? That's just it! Ah, those are words of gold, son! We must stick to the mine, boys! She's our bread-giver, our everything." He spoke in his usual quick patter, but his voice had a note of reverent affection as it always had when he spoke about the mine. "Here's to the mine, children!" he proposed. "A good long drink!"

They clinked glasses and drank. Vera had been given a glass, too. She blushed furiously but dared not refuse, and took a little sip.

"Well, how are things in Stalino town?" Uncle Onisim asked, helping himself to the snacks. "I remember it when it was still Yuzovka—"

"You wouldn't recognize it now, Uncle Onisim. It isn't Yuzovka, it's a metropolis!"

"Well, I never! Funny doings these days—folks get older, but towns get younger, eh?" He laughed.

"How are things here?" Svetlichny asked. "Our Maria is beginning to make some noise, I've been told."

"And what a noise!" cried Uncle Onisim. "The star over the pit head never goes out now!"

"Yes, we're making a noise," said Victor. "Like an empty barrel." He took a cucumber, cut it in half and started sprinkling it thickly with salt. "That's the kind of noise we're making!" he repeated angrily.

Svetlichny regarded him closely. How long was it since they had last seen one another? Four years. It is said that when old friends meet again the first things they seek are the old endearing traits. But more often the first glance is a doubting one, as if to say, "Well, let's see what changes there are in my friend. And is he still a friend?" Not until then does one look for the old traits in the new changed person.

Svetlichny studied Victor and Andrei critically all the evening. With narrowed eyes, his knee clasped in his hands, he watched and listened patiently while the boys, slowly and grudgingly, disclosed themselves to him. He recognized in Victor the old endearing brusqueness and hot-headedness, and in Andrei the familiar slow, dogged resolution and that funny tuft of straw-like hair over his obstinate forehead. They were the same, and yet different. What a tremendous difference! They were no longer the timid lads they had been five years ago. They even walked differently, with a firmer tread, drawing a groaning protest from the floor-boards of Uncle Onisim's dilapidated hostel. Their eyes, too, looked more sophisticated. Gone was the look of boyish wonder. Their narrowed glance spoke of the five years they had worked by pit-light. Yes, they had grown up and matured, the scamps! And learned sense, too, by the looks of it!

"What Victor means is that our set could work better," Andrei slowly explained, pacing up and down the room. He stopped in front of Svetlichny and complained: "We're cramped for space."

"Men are working at half strength! D'you understand that, Fyodor?" Victor broke in.

"The benches are short. What is a miserable eight metres! You can't even get into your stride," Andrei went on. "And as for the air—"

"Wait a minute, Andrei! Let me explain!"

Vera quietly slipped out from behind the table. She did not want to go, but she was afraid she was in the way. She did not go, however, but merely moved over to a chair beside Andrei's bed and busied herself with Andrei's work jacket, which needed mending. She was not listening to the boys' noisy talk. They were arguing about their own men's affairs, while she was doing her own woman's job. And she felt quite happy. If only it were always like that!

Svetlichny became seriously interested in what Vic-

tor was telling him. The ironic look vanished from his narrowed eyes, and he was frowning now, not smiling. He listened without interrupting. Suddenly he felt envious of the boys. Their words brought to him the familiar breath of life and the mine. To think that he had spent four years at a desk like a schoolboy!

He got up and said:

"Then why don't you go ahead, boys? What are you moaning for? Smash it down!"

"Smash what down?" Victor asked, puzzled.

"Everything! The old run of things! The old prejudices. The old standards and work conditions. Smash 'em all to hell!"

"I say, go easy, young chap!" said Uncle Onisim. He was not fond of such talk.

Svetlichny laughed.

"Oh, no. If we're going to do things, let's do them properly, the miner's way, and no monkeying about! Make a clean sweep, damn it!" He now felt like teasing Uncle Onisim and egging the boys on. Things couldn't have turned out better! He had come here for practical studies and landed right in the middle of a fight. Another fight—splendid! The more the better. The eternal struggle between the old and the new. His element. It occurred to him that life would be intolerable without this highly-charged air.

He asked:

"Have you boys told anyone about these ideas of yours?"

"No. Who can we tell?" Victor brushed the question aside.

"More's the pity. Who's your overman?"

"Prokop Maximovich. Uncle Prokop," Andrei answered.

"Ah! Fine. He's a clever chap. A game one, too. And who's colliery manager—the Old Man?"

"Yes, the Old Man."

"And who's the chief engineer?" Svetlichny felt himself on the battle-field already. He had to know the disposition of the forces, the fire power of the artillery, the state of the rear zones and reserves. He had to weigh the chances, make allowance for possible foes and unexpected allies. "And who's the Party organizer?" he asked.

"Nechayenko, Nikolai Ostapovich. . . ."

"A new man, don't know him. Is he a miner? Knows his job? On good terms with the Old Man? Will he fight?"

Andrei took his time before answering. He had never considered what sort of a man the new Party organizer was. Nor for that matter had he ever given any thought as to what kind of men the Old Man, the chief engineer and the Trust manager were.

"Nechayenko?" he queried thoughtfully. "He's a good man."

"A good man is not a Party definition. . . ." laughed Svetlichny.

Andrei, upon further reflection, shook his head.

"I don't agree," he said. "If a man's good he's one of us, belongs to our party."

* 7 *

The time had long since passed when Andrei had considered the mine, like the world, ideally arranged on an eternal and infallible pattern. Today he knew that in the mine, as in the world at large, everything kept changing and had to keep changing for the better. For such was the law of life, the law of movement.

Always the instrument of these changes were men, human beings—those restless busy men called revolutionaries, innovators and leading workers, who were forever dissatisfied, unappeased, obsessed by a yearning to remake and remould. Andrei himself, unfortunately, did not

feel that he was one of those men yet. But he wanted to become one.

During that hot summer the two friends were harassed by a sense of great uneasiness. Their life till then had flowed on like a placid stream—from stone to stone, one day like another. They had been satisfied with its peaceful current and made no attempt to change it.

Now, however, they felt cramped within its banks. Like a sluggish stream which, swelled by the spring freshets, suddenly begins rushing wildly and floods its banks, so did our two boys, in a strange tumult of soul, feel the hot restless blood quickening in their veins, stirring vague desires and passions. But whereas Victor was harassed chiefly by a surfeit of muscular strength—he was unable to expend it all in the pit, on the spree or in boisterous dancing—Andrei became increasingly conscious of a stirring inner force which ever more compellingly sought an outlet. Svetlichny's arrival merely tended to quicken that force, as April rains quicken the growth of a plant.

Victor had but one thought now—to be given a whole working face on which he could have free play at last and show the stuff he was made of. He'd show them records then, at least as good as Nikita Izotov's! He was sure of his powers, his skill and his miner's luck.

Andrei, however, knew that Victor's idea was nothing but a daring dream. "If the working face was a straight one, I could understand! But eight benches, kirving eight times, everything multiplied by eight. And what's more, timbering as you go along. You might bring it off once and set a record! But you couldn't do it every day. Flash-in-the-pan methods are not good enough here." Andrei argued with himself. "You've got to use your brains. What about first straightening out the working face? What if the hewer's work were organized differently? What about altering the whole routine from zero?"

Andrei thought of this very often now, both in the pit and at home. Imperceptibly, it had become the main concern of his life. He knew that Victor, and Svetlichny, and Uncle Prokop, and Dasha—they had discussed it with her too—and perhaps other miners all over the country were thinking of the same thing. The time for those ideas was ripe.

In the evenings Uncle Prokop's quiet little house was the scene of hot and lengthy disputes.

Victor cried excitedly:

"What's the use of all this arguing! Give me elbow room and I'll show you what can be done in practice! You're the overman, Prokop Maximovich, it depends on you."

The old man merely shook his head sceptically.

"I doubt whether you'll do it, lad. Only make a fool of yourself."

"Who? Me?" Victor cried. "Why, I—I . . ." Words failed him and he glared about him in impotent fury. Did no one here believe in him, believe in his hands, his ability?

Oddly enough Dasha was the only one who took his side. She believed it could be done. But instead of welcoming her support, he rather feared it, suspecting a catch in it.

But Dasha was sincere. It was Victor himself she still treated with faint mockery, not his idea. She could already imagine how it would be: a long, steppe-long working face, and a fine, tough miner—Victor or somebody else, it didn't matter to her—working with easy grace down its whole length all by himself, fearlessly bringing the coal down in cascades. And not a sound but the ring of steel on coal! Beautiful! Thrilling! She would have tried it herself, but. . . .

What a shame she had not been born a boy! What a miner she would have made! She loved coal. Some of her Moscow acquaintances could not understand how anyone

could love coal working; she, on her part, could not understand anyone not loving it.

She had grown up in a Soviet colliery and knew no other. The pit had never been a black prison to her, but always a second home—mysterious at first, dear and familiar afterwards—home, where her father, her uncle and her neighbours worked. She was fond of digging holes in the sand when a child, playing at “mines” with the boys. She had gone to work in the same skylarking spirit. They had given her a job as lamp girl, and she liked the game. She liked coming like a beam of light into the dark workings where the coal-hewer stood waiting for her. She liked the nickname “Fire-Fly” the miners gave her. She liked everything in the mine—the low vaults and the murmur of underground streams, the tinkling drips and the pull of air round the turns, and most of all that mysterious maze of drifts, galleries and goafs through which she roamed fearlessly. She was afraid of nothing. Even in childhood, when fairyland weaves its threads through the pattern of life, she knew that there were no magicians, ghosts, gnomes or fairies in the mine, only Uncle Stepan the firer and Uncle Trofim the driller. But on the surface, both Uncle Stepan and Uncle Trofim were merely quiet good neighbours. Down there in the pit they became, like her father, all-powerful giants with black beards and many arms. They were, to her, the real magicians, usually kind ones when sober, and sometimes wicked ones when not.

Then Dasha grew up and began to work in the mine herself, and now she was studying. All the mysterious passages and secret nooks in the pit now had their technical names, and the very air in the shaft, its vapours and gases fitted simply and easily into precise formulas. Yet the childish, poetic affection towards the mine, as towards the fairy-tale, remained for ever. Looking at Dasha’s trim, well-built figure in smart top-boots, no one would have

suspected this. People had grown to regard her since childhood as a harum-scarum tomboy. She could whistle like a horse-putter, was quick of hand and tongue, stood no nonsense from the boys, and was permanently decorated with scratches and bruises.

"What are you afraid of, Dad?" she said, fearlessly attacking her father, as though the decision on Victor's record depended wholly upon him. "Can't you make up your mind?"

"Easy now, not so fast, for God's sake!" Prokop said wryly. "What's it got to do with you, anyhow? Why must you always butt in when men are talking business." In his heart, however, he was pleased that she took a lively interest in the affairs of the mine. She couldn't very well stand aloof. A future engineer! His own daughter! His happy glance caressed her trim figure.

Aware of this, she kept up her attack.

"In my opinion," she cried with assurance (while Andrei, forgetting all else in the world, gazed upon her with frank admiration), "in my opinion the thing's quite possible. And Victor's not the only man who can set the record. There'll be others too. Take Mitya Zakorko, for example. Or Andrei. You could do it, Andrei, couldn't you?"

Andrei hardly heard the question. He just sat admiring her, gazing raptly at her flushed, determined face. "Isn't she wonderful! There's no one in the world like her!" He could scarcely say what he liked most in her—her eyes or her lips. There was not a single feature he saw separately, because he loved everything in her, just as she was. Yes, he loved her, although he would not have admitted it to anyone. There was no desire or passion in that love so far, nothing but a wonderful tenderness tinged with awe, but such as it was it had already turned the poor boy's head.

She was waiting for his answer.

"Couldn't you, Andrei?" she repeated gently but impatiently.

"Couldn't I what?" he asked, coming down to earth.

Everyone laughed, and Svetlichny smiled quizzically.

"I was saying," Dasha went on, puckering her brows in an angry frown, "that you could set a record, too, like Victor. Aren't I right?"

"No," he answered quietly. "I wouldn't undertake it." He spread his hands in confusion and bent his head the next instant, submissively prepared to meet the storm of Dasha's mockery. He could not tell her a lie.

"There, you see!" Prokop said triumphantly. "What did I tell you?"

Dasha turned her back on Andrei but said nothing. Strange to say, she was a little afraid of this quiet lad and secretly respected him.

"There!" Prokop said in a satisfied tone. "That's the way clever men talk. 'I wouldn't undertake it.' And quite right too! Eight benches!"

"But what if we were to make it a straight-line job?" Svetlichny suggested. With him, as with every experienced leader, daring went hand in hand with caution. It was three weeks since he had arrived at the Steep Maria, and he was working as Uncle Prokop's assistant. He had taken a good look round and thought things over, but did not feel ready to sound the attack.

"Oh, all right!" Victor said with a shrug. "Give me a straight run, give me benches. Makes no difference. I'm sure of myself."

All now looked towards Uncle Prokop, who tugged nervously at his moustache, pondering.

"Yes," he said at length. "That's a clincher, of course. It may work with Victor—"

"Of course it'll work!" Dasha cried gleefully.

"Yes. . . . But we've got to think of the mine and not just of Victor alone."

"Why, will the mine be any worse off if I do the work of eight men?" Victor said with warmth.

"I didn't say it would. On the contrary, it'll be splendid!"

"Well?"

"You'll make a big noise, granted. But then what? Well, you'll do the work of eight men, say. You, perhaps even Andrei, and Mitya Zakorko. The big three! But I'm afraid you'll crack up. Men are not machines, you know. It's all right for setting a record, but it's a tough job for the shift day in day out. What's going to happen? Consider it calmly, state-mindedly. On a straight wall without any benches there'll be no room for other hewers. There'll be some days when you won't be able to tackle as much as half your stretch. That will disorganize the whole set, and instead of making good we'll look damn foolish! That's the way I look at it. But then I'm an old geezer. Perhaps it'll work out different with you young fellows?" he added with a chuckle, surveying the company, and especially his daughter, with an amused look.

There was a moment of awkward silence. Victor was on the point of making some sharp retort, but Svetlichny checked him.

"Wait a minute! What do you propose then, Prokop Maximovich?" he asked calmly.

"Make the benches longer. What else could you do?" he said, spreading his hands.

"What's the use of that, it won't give me more room!" Victor shouted. "You can't set a famous record in such conditions!"

"What is it you're after—a record or coal?" Uncle Prokop demanded.

"It's fame he's after!" Svetlichny said.

"Fame for the whole mine, not just for me," growled Victor. "What do I want it for? I'm fed up. And I'm fed up with all this talk!" he said with a gesture of annoy-

ance, going up to the window and looking out at the garden. The restless fluff from the poplar trees was floating about in the air.

"What's your opinion, son?" Prokop turned to Andrei, his favourite, in a kindly tone.

"Mine?" Andrei started. "I was thinking..."

* 8 *

He had indeed been thinking. He seldom took part in an argument. He preferred to listen in silence and think. Whether in the hostel, in the pit, or visiting friends. In the pit most of all. One's thoughts run smoothly in the pit. There is hardly a workman more given to thought than a miner. Miners are all philosophers and dreamers!

"You boys are flying high," Uncle Onisim once said, after listening to Svetlichny. "Got a finger in the State pie, I see! A miner didn't dare dream of such things in our day. But we had our dreams, too." He smiled sadly. "To be sure! We dreamt of the Saturday booze. Or else of a piebald cow, or of the blue hare—if you know what they stand for."

And sitting down on the bed next to Andrei, he began telling them what the miners' cherished dreams had been in the old days:

"Every one hugged his own pet dream. Naturally. One has to in the pit. Dark, you know. Sometimes a fellow would hack away at it for a week on end without coming to the surface—sleep in the pit—so long as he could make some extra money! And come Saturday he'd go to the surface, draw his pay, and make straight for the shop. There he'd spend it all on this, that and the other thing—maybe a pair of bottle-top boots, or a jacket, or a red shirt with some fancy embroidery. Well, he'd prink himself up and then go for a promenade down Office Street. He'd prance

up and down the street, like a show horse, swanking about, and then betake himself to the pub. He'd pass out of the picture until Monday. Sell everything off his back to pay for the drinks—boots, jacket, shirt and all, and sometimes the cross off his neck. Monday he'd be back in harness again until next Booze Saturday. Ugh!" He gave a hopeless gesture. "But there were some who didn't drink at all. They were the ones who dreamed about the piebald cow."

The cow dream was not altogether unattainable. One could buy that piebald cow on the market anywhere—if one had the money. Many a seasonal worker from the country sweated and slaved all the winter to save the kopeks, and if he kept it up until the spring without spending his savings on drink—which rarely happened—he'd go back to his village the richer by a cow.

The blue-hare dream was more fantastic. No one had ever seen a blue hare, but the old men firmly believed that a blue hare lived in the derelict workings. However, it was not given to everyone to see it—a coward would turn back and a fool would miss it. But, the story went, a time would come when the blue hare would show itself to all people, the brave and the timid alike. Then truth and justice would reign upon earth, and the mine would cease to be the miserable place it was.

"D'you mean to say nobody dreamed about raising output and improving mining methods?" Andrei asked naively.

"What for?" Uncle Onisim said, surprised. "For whose benefit? The Belgian boss's? The German director's? No! Every man had an eye to the main chance." After a reflective pause he added: "Besides, there wasn't any progressive scale then. . . ."

Andrei would not think about himself, but about the common good. Crouching, bent almost double, in the narrow workings deep underground, deprived of sun and sky,

Andrei Voronko, miner, thought about his country, his State, and about the miner's place in the world. How is it that he had not dwelt on such things from the start? The lift of wings had been lacking. He had been new to the job, a blind, groping kitten in the pit. And now. . . . Now there were no mysteries in the pit to him, no unknown corners. He was master-craftsman here now. And the master-eye told him—"I could produce much more. I could work much better. Work should be organized on different lines."

He was beginning dimly to realize how this could be done. So far it was only a dream, not a decision, and he kept it to himself for the time being.

"I ought to talk it over with Dasha," he sometimes thought. "I wonder what she'd think of it? She's a specialist, after all." But the reason why he wanted to consult Dasha was not because she was a "specialist," but because all his thoughts, and desires, and actions were now bound up with Dasha. She had woven herself inextricably into his life.

Thinking of his native land, he thought of Dasha, for it was her native land, too. Dreaming about the future of the mine, the town and the State, he found himself dreaming of his own and Dasha's future, and even—with an involuntary blush—of their children's future. It was all entwined in a single close-drawn knot—Dasha, love, the mine, the State, Victor, friendship, success that had to be achieved for the country's sake and Dasha's—and all this, pieced together, formed the pattern of the life he was now living.

Life without Victor had been inconceivable to him; but now he could not imagine life without Victor and Dasha.

Dasha was with him always—in his waking thoughts and in his dreams. Even at work he could not forget her. She hovered about him in the pit not as a heavenly vision, but as the gay "Fire-Fly" with the pit lamp in her hand.

She made herself at home in his lonely working. In her invisible presence he found it easier to work, to think and to breathe.

Sometimes, carried away by his work, he forgot her for a moment, but the next instant her image leapt out vivid and compelling somewhere in the wavy flow of the seam or in the darkly glinting roof overhead, smiling archly at him, while he smiled back shyly and resumed with her his unspoken and heartfelt talk of love, life, happiness, and the future as he saw it. He pictured to himself the quiet harmony of their modest working life together. They would have a little white cottage of their own, one like Uncle Prokop's, with pansies, carnations and asters in the front garden. Andrei would study, of course, so as to catch up with the learned Dasha. They would read together and discuss books. But they would never leave the mine, not for any place in the world. Where could they go, anyhow—they were miners. And in the evenings Victor would come to see them. He would marry, too, and set up in a cottage next door, and every evening they would meet in the garden, a big happy family, to drink tea and chat peacefully under the acacias.

There was such ineffable charm in these simple modest dreams of bliss that Andrei's head reeled.

More often than not, however, he was assailed by doubts and anguish. This can never be, he thought in despair. Dasha would never fall in love with a great clumsy lout like him!

But sometimes, especially when huge chunks of coal came away under his hammer, bringing a joyous realization of his own powers and place in the world, he would take heart and begin to believe that his dream would come true and that Dasha would step across the threshold of his little white cottage.

But, not once had he spoken to her about his love. Thousands of unuttered words of tender passion remained

locked up in his soul. They could never be expressed in speech, for they existed only in the language of eyes. Andrei loved in secret and believed it was a secret to all. He did not know, poor fellow, that it had long ceased to be a secret to anyone, including Dasha herself.

"As soon as Victor and I set the record, I'll tell her of my love," he decided.

He could hardly have explained exactly what connection there was between his confession of love and the record. But he was dimly aware that such a connection existed and that, after the record, life—both his and Victor's—would be different.

Meanwhile, the record was as far off as ever. They still gathered at Uncle Prokop's house, argued, discussed and disputed without coming to any decision. Andrei, as usual, was silent.

One day Victor, unable to stand it any longer, exploded:

"How long are we going to beat about the bush? Tell me straight—are you going to back me or not?"

"Keep your hair on!" Svetlichny said. "This is a serious business."

"Are you afraid?"

"I am."

"Well, in that case, stand aside. And don't hinder me. I'll go ahead myself, take the chance."

"And what if you fail?"

"Why should you worry! I'm taking the risk and everything that goes with it."

"Oh, no!" said Svetlichny "Wrong-headed zeal may kill a good idea."

"But the idea is mine!" Victor shouted.

"Oh, no, it isn't. It's ours now."

"Then what's to be done?" Victor cried in despair. "You people have tied me hand and foot, and you won't let me even squeak! At least you ought to understand

me—I can't go on working the old way now. I just can't! It's hell, makes me feel cheap!"

"We understand that quite well, son," Prokop sighed sympathetically. "That's why we're trying to find a way out. Your idea's a splendid one, only it can't be realized."

"Yes, it can," Andrei suddenly said in a quiet voice.

He said it in a matter-of-fact level tone, little suspecting the tremendous explosive power his words were charged with, what a great new thing they inaugurated.

Years afterwards, when that evening was nothing more than a long-passed milestone to them, they were unable even to recollect the details. Victor, plunged in gloom, did not seem to hear what Andrei had said; Svetlichny looked up at Andrei in surprise, but said nothing; Uncle Prokop merely made a wry face.

"What are you talking about, Andrei," he said with annoyance. "You said yourself only the other day—"

"It can be done!" Andrei repeated, reddening. "But you'll have to distribute the work differently."

It had not sunk in yet. He started explaining, haltingly:

"Don't you see, the coal-hewer should do nothing but cut, while the timberers do all the timbering for him as he goes along. . . ."

"What?" gasped Svetlichny.

It was so unexpected and so simple, so amazingly simple, that it had never occurred to any of them before. Even now they could not grasp the idea right away, for all its simplicity or rather because of its simplicity. It made a clean sweep of the old established order and that was not a thing one could accept immediately without question. Since time immemorial the miner had cut coal and done his own timbering. It was as natural as it was for the peasant both to plough and to sow his land. And suddenly here comes a lad, neither a specialist nor an

engineer, but an ordinary miner, who would smash up this established order of things at one fell stroke!

Had Andrei proposed something utterly fantastic it would have staggered them less than this did. It is easier to go into battle against the unknown than to go against the old established order. Any theory-spinner, in the seclusion of his study, can hatch a new "philosophical" system or religion without taxing any courage he may have. Only a genuine revolutionary has the spirit to rebel against one of the most sinister powers on earth—the time-blessed force of habit.

This force of habit was so strong that not even Uncle Prokop, shrewd, brave man though he was, could accept Andrei's idea right away.

"Wait a minute, wait a minute!" he muttered. "What about roof control? And earnings? Are they to be shared alike?" These were trivial objections, and he flung them aside as soon as he raised them. Nevertheless he sought similar objections, in an endeavour to puzzle out for himself why no one before this youngster—this Andrei, his pupil—had been able to hit on such a wise and simple idea.

Suddenly, breaking off in the middle of a word, he cried:

"It's the very thing! You've got it!" And in a transport of delight he went over to Andrei and hugged him.

They all crowded round the flustered Andrei.

"Can it be true? I can't believe it! Can this idea of Andrei's be workable?" Dasha cried, glancing from her father's face to Andrei's with a look of eager hope.

"It's workable! You bet, it's workable!" Victor clamoured, beside himself with joy. "Well, now we'll get going! Whew!" He raised his great fists aloft and shook them.

"But how about the Old Man?" Svetlichny asked.

But not even this could damp the general ardour.

"What about him!" Victor cried, taking the bit between his teeth. "No Old Man can stop us now!"

"He's something of a puzzle, the Old Man. You never know what to expect from him," Prokop said. "But he's a shrewd chap. We ought really to go to the Colliery Party Committee first and get their support, but the trouble is Nechayenko's gone away on holiday—"

"And it's no use going to see Neshcheretny!" Victor said with a hopeless gesture. "He won't tell you anything definite."

"All right, then we'll go and see the Old Man!"

There was merry-making that evening in Uncle Prokop's little house. One would have thought that the whole thing was settled and that the Old Man had given the idea his blessing. One would have thought that the record had already been set and that life on earth was happier because of it. All their hopes and dreams—Svetlichny's dream about the new shaft, Victor's about the record, and Andrei's about love and eternal bliss with the sweetest girl in the world—seemed to have come true.

* 9 *

Everyone in the mining town called the Steep Maria colliery manager the Old Man. His real name was Dyadok—Gleb Ignatovich Dyadok. Ignatovich and not the more usual Ignatievich—a point he always insisted upon. Whenever anyone used the wrong patronymic, he patiently, without any show of irritation, corrected the error.

He was a native of Byelorussia, hailing from the Vitebsk Region. He had left his native parts when he was

still a boy, and had never been home since. He had no intention of doing so either. But he always called himself a Byelorussian, was very proud of it, wore shirts embroidered with Vitebsk cross-stitch, called a potato by the Byelorussian name *boolba* and loved it in every shape and form, and his speech still retained the peculiar soft pronunciation of the consonants, especially when he was excited.

Whenever a party of his countrymen arrived to work at the mine he would immediately hunt them out. The first thing he did upon coming into the barrack was to inquire whether there was anyone from his parts—there usually was—and then he would start questioning them about his relatives (of whom few survived) and his acquaintances (of whom there were many, all having been at the mine at one time or another). Then he would call for vodka and boolbas, drink furiously without ever getting drunk, and sit with his square blue-grey chin resting on his famous gnarled stick, which he never parted with, not even in the pit, while he listened to the long drawn-out songs of his native land.

He had been managing the Maria for two years, and managing it well. Under him the words “hitch” and “bottle-neck” were almost forgotten. He was a strict and efficient manager, with a thorough knowledge of mining. His superiors respected him and were even a little afraid of him, and the production plans they set for his colliery were never such as to tax its resources.

The chief secret of his success, however, lay elsewhere. In those years the coal-fields still suffered from a continual ebb and flow of labour. It was like the tides but, whereas the sea had its tidal laws, there were apparently no laws governing these human “tides,” not even seasonal ones. From one shift to another, no one could foretell how many men would go down in the cage, or how many would quit the mine altogether.

The Old Man's colliery suffered from this ebb and flow, too, but it seldom knew any labour shortage, thanks to the Byelorussians.

The legend of the Old Man, the good old compatriot in charge of a colliery who received his fellow-countrymen with open arms and open heart, was current in all the villages of Byelorussia, far beyond the boundaries of his native district. "Aye, you go out where Gleb is, that's where you'll find your bread. You'll live in clover under the Old Man's wing," the old-timers would say. And so fellow-countrymen in their white *svitka* overcoats and sheepskins flocked to the mine, and all of them the Old Man took on.

He was a kind, unassuming man, and the miners loved him. He lived a simple, solitary life—his wife had died long since and his grown-up children had gone their separate ways—and the colliery-owned house he lived in was chill and empty. He only slept there, spending all his time in the mine, the office and the hostels. He was guest of honour at dinner parties, best man at all weddings, and godfather at all christenings. Priest or no priest, the christenings and weddings were held just the same; but there was not a christening or a wedding held at the colliery without the Old Man.

His big burly figure, although somewhat flabby with age, was still impressive, and when he made his progress down the streets of the mining town, leaning heavily on his stick, as though making a round of inspection of the pit workings, all the passers-by doffed their caps to him and bowed. He would respond unsmilingly with a silent nod. He seldom smiled. He never said a kind word to anybody, never cracked jokes with the miners, never slapped them on the back or called them "boys" or "heroes." He permitted no familiarity.

But he knew by name not merely every miner but also every miner's wife, and every child at the colliery. He

knew whose grimy little urchin that was, playing in the sand, who was that spindly little girl with the red bow in her pigtails, running down to the oil-shop with a big canister. He knew everyone and everything, for that was what he lived for. These people were the chief interest of his life. No wonder they called him the Old Man. He was respected and feared, not as a chief—the miners feared no one!—but precisely as the Old Man, just as in old peasant families the patriarch is revered, accorded the authority of a sage, despite the decrepitude that keeps him chained to his bed on the ledge of the stove.

In a way the Old Man was such a patriarch to the big family of coal miners, and he loved his coal-be-grimed children with a stern, sombre, almost paternal love.

When the disaster occurred in the Maria the year before—a gas explosion in the east drift—and seventeen miners lost their lives, the Old Man did not try to escape the tears and wrath of the bereaved, but went to them himself. Not to comfort the widows—this he was incapable of—but to advise and even order them how to face the future.

“Cry, go on, cry!” he said to one woman who, startled by his entrance, began hastily wiping her eyes with her apron. “You’ve plenty to cry over!” He sat down on a stool, placed his stick between his knees, blew his nose loudly into a big handkerchief and went on in a calm level voice: “You won’t find another husband like Anton, my dear woman! He was a good fellow, hard-working, never drank. . . .” He seemed to be deliberately putting salt on the fresh wound. The widow burst into tears, and the children, clutching her skirt, began squalling, while the Old Man sat there imperturbably, shaking his grey head and saying in a quiet exhortative way:

“Yes, Dunya, cry—that’s all a widow can do! The State will help you with money, coal, of course, and so

on. You'll be cared for. And if you marry again, sometime, nobody will think the worse of you. Keep that at the back of your mind."

"How can you say that, Gleb Ignatovich!" the widow bridled up. "As if I can think of such a thing now!"

"Now, don't argue, Dunya, don't argue! I know better. The kids need a father." He drew the youngest to him and continued: "If you make up your mind to marry, come and ask my advice. And don't marry a young fellow, whatever you do. Take a serious, respectable man. Are you listening?"

"Yes, Gleb Ignatovich. But you oughtn't to talk to me of such things. It isn't right...."

"Never mind that, you listen to me! I'm talking sense. It's for your own good. I'd advise you to marry a widower. Sevastyanov, now—he's the man for you. A decent hard-working chap, fond of children.... Well," he said, getting up, "you've got to think of life! One must go on living. I'll drop in again some time."

And he would go on to the next house to meet more tears and more sorrow. There, too, he would sit listening, apparently unmoved, to the sobs of the widows, the lamentations of the old women and the squalling of the children, doing nothing to stay them, letting them "have their cry out." And then, instead of pouring out words of condolence, he would start talking about humdrum things, about the sober facts of life.

"Well, Matryona, you'll be getting a big sum in cash now from the State. D'you hear? Mind you don't fool it away. It's not your money, it's theirs!"—pointing to the children. "Put it in the savings bank. I'll see that you do. D'you hear?"

"Yes, Gleb Ignatovich," the widow answered sullenly.

"Well, that's that!" he nodded. "Fine! You're a bad-tempered woman, my dear, but that doesn't matter now so much. Your temper may even help you along in life

now. There. . . . And if you're thinking of marrying again," he added suddenly, "you might as well drop the idea! No one will marry you. You're not Dunya."

"I don't intend to. I had one husband and you've gone and killed him."

"Not me, the gas."

"It's all the same to me. He's dead, and now I've got fatherless children on my hands."

"Well! You brought 'em into the world; now they're your care. Tell yourself this, my dear: Your woman's days are over. You've got to live for the children and in your children. Forget your own happiness." He spoke, as always, hard blunt words, and as always, their effect was stronger and more helpful than smooth, easy sympathy. "The children are your happiness now, my dear!" he continued. "I'll have Vasya transferred to the workings; he'll earn more there. He's getting to be a big boy. It's time Petya was fixed up, too."

"I won't let them go down the pit, not for anything in the world!" Matryona shrieked wildly. "I won't!" She screened the children with her body like a mother hen.

"Those are just idle words, woman!" the Old Man said wryly. "What other place is there for a miner but the pit? You've got to face life, not whimper. So there you are. I'll give Petya a job at the pumps, let him learn the business. As for Anyuta, let her keep on at school. As time goes on we'll fix up the younger ones. So that's that." And leaning heavily on his stick, he hoisted himself up and moved on to the next house.

Such was Gleb Ignatovich Dyadok, the Old Man, manager of the Steep Maria Colliery, to whom Andrei and Victor were going to bring their cherished dream of mining records.

The Old Man made an appointment in the office for five o'clock.

An hour before the appointed time all the participants of the "plot" foregathered in Uncle Prokop's cottage to decide who was to go and see the Old Man.

"You and Victor should go," Uncle Prokop said to Andrei. "You're the ones who started it."

"I'm afraid we're just boys to him..." Andrei said embarrassedly. "The Old Man won't believe us. I wanted to suggest that you go, Prokop Maximovich."

"All right. I don't mind," Prokop agreed. "The Old Man knows me—"

"It would be good if Svetlichny went too," Andrei added timidly.

Svetlichny laughed.

"Bringing all the guns into play?"

"Well, you see, I'm not much of a speaker," Andrei explained almost apologetically. "And Victor's hot-headed. But you're an experienced man, Fyodor." He looked at his friend with eyes full of devotion.

"Let's all go!" Uncle Prokop said, laughing. "We'll come down on the Old Man like a ton of bricks." He went out to change his clothes.

Victor and Svetlichny stayed indoors to finish off the cold beer, while Andrei and Dasha went out into the garden. Dasha noticed a faint quiver in Andrei's tensed jaws.

"You're not nervous, are you?" she asked in surprise.

"I am!" Andrei confessed. How could he explain to her what this plan meant to him? But he could not keep silent any longer. "If the Old Man allows it, and we ... we succeed in doing it, I'll ... er ... I'll tell you something, Dasha," he whispered, believing that he was setting her a puzzle.

"Really?" she smiled. "All right, then, I'll wait!"

She knew what he wanted to tell her. So far as she was concerned it didn't matter whether he said it now or afterwards. She knew about his love without his saying

a word. It occurred to her that if it had been Svetlichny who had suddenly declared his love to her, she would have been thrown into confusion; and with Victor, she would have been simply angry. But to Andrei she could listen unperturbed.

Still, it was pleasant, very pleasant to know that someone loved you, and Andrei was a very nice boy. The proud realization that she was capable of exciting men's love, and such ardent devoted love as Andrei's, thrilled her deeply. "If I told him: 'Andrei, jump down the shaft!' he'd do it head first, really he would!"

"How wonderful it is to be loved like that!" she thought happily. This was the first time anyone had fallen in love with her, or spoken to her of love. With Mitya Zakorko it was different—he was just a friend, a childhood friend. Andrei was the first to love her. And she was grateful to him and loved him for it.

But was it real love? She enjoyed his company, felt at ease with him, although he was always tongue-tied and did little but fidget nervously and break match-sticks. On the other hand he would listen rapturously to her chatter and marvel at her wit, her learning and sweet disposition. So much so that she herself suddenly began to feel cleverer, and kinder, and older. She grew in her own estimation, seeing herself, as it were, in the mirror of his enamoured eyes. Yes! It was ever so thrilling!

However, she never missed him when he was absent, did not blush when he appeared, did not suffer heartache and yearning, slept excellently, moon or no moon, and ate her meals with the keen "miner's appetite." No, that was not the way love was described in books. But perhaps the books were wrong.

Prokop Maximovich appeared dressed in his Sunday best, as if he were going to a party.

"Let's be getting along, boys!" he shouted cheerfully, leading the way.

Dasha saw them off to the gate and stood there for a long time, gazing after them. Andrei looked back, and she waved her handkerchief to him. At that moment she felt she really loved him.

* 10 *

In the office, besides the Old Man, there sat the chief engineer of the colliery Pyotr Fomich Glushkov, a man with grey bushy brows and black, bright, almost boyish eyes. Those eyes had once probably sparkled with mirth, wit and vitality; now they were nervous and restless. They were odd eyes. They had not lost their quickness and sparkle, but now it was the sparkle of anxiety, the quickness of panic. Pyotr Fomich was a man who, having once experienced a terrible shock, remained permanently stunned.

A year before, a catastrophe had occurred at the Steep Maria. No one had blamed Pyotr Fomich for it in any way, or cast a reproach upon him. That it was an accident was obvious to everyone except Pyotr Fomich. But he brooded, thinking that perhaps there had been some oversight on his part, some neglect of precautionary measures. He grew suspicious, cautious, nervous, mistrustful of himself and others.

He was much less engrossed in his work than in trying to vindicate himself. When issuing an order, he mentally adduced arguments and explanations in his defence, all the clauses of laws and regulations. He seemed to be holding an inquest on himself all the time. His chief care was to fence himself around with documents, instructions and reservations; he built up a veritable wall of saving clauses behind which he could feel safe.

Neither Pyotr Fomich nor the Old Man had any idea what Andrei and Victor wanted to see them about. Both

felt intuitively, however, that it was something far more important than the usual miners' requests and solicitations. Pyotr Fomich was keyed up in advance against anything the boys might propose. That they were going to propose something new, and therefore risky, he had not the slightest doubt.

The Old Man, on the other hand, was as inscrutable as ever. He looked up slowly when the boys, with Prokop Maximovich at their head, trooped into the office, and a shade of annoyance crossed his face.

"Quite a crowd. . ."

"It's quite a business," Prokop answered, spreading his hands with a bland smile.

"And all of you on the same business?"

"Yes."

"Ah, well," growled the Old Man. "Sit down. What is it?" And he shut his eyes.

Andrei looked at Svetlichny pleadingly.

"You start, Fyodor!" he whispered.

Svetlichny shrugged his shoulders and began.

He started by saying that the state of affairs at the colliery was intolerable (Pyotr Fomich almost jumped out of his chair when he heard this), that the coal-hewers and their pneumatic hammers were being employed at half capacity, that the men were cramped for space at the working faces ("I'm ashamed to look men in the eyes!" Victor interrupted); that these things had been preying on the minds of the leading miners for a long time and they were thinking how to improve matters and get more coal ("That's right, that's right!" whispered Andrei), and that after wrestling with the problem, miners Andrei Voronko and Victor Abrosimov had found a way out of the situation, and—

"What way out?" Pyotr Fomich cried impatiently, feeling that a nervous spasm was beginning to draw the skin on his forehead and bald head.

The Old Man maintained an imperturbable silence. He seemed to be dozing, and not listening at all. His eyes were half closed under their heavy lids.

"What way out?" Svetlichny smiled. "I'll tell you..." and he simply and briefly set forth Andrei's and Victor's plan for giving the coal-hewer the whole working face, and making the timbering a separate job.

"But you can't do that ... it's impossible!" shouted Pyotr Fomich. "It isn't ... it isn't provided for. Besides, it's dangerous! Roof control, I mean... And how can you talk about 'an intolerable state of affairs' in the mine? Aren't we systematically fulfilling the plan, even overfulfilling it by one to two per cent? Here are the figures. Look! There you are..." He was almost beside himself. Svetlichny and Victor were not merely unsatisfied men to him now; they were grim accusers. He looked cowed and frightened, as if expecting one of these ruthless young men to throw an accusation into his face at any moment.

The Old Man said nothing.

"There's no need to get excited, Pyotr Fomich!" Uncle Prokop interposed with a smile. "Consider it. I was bamboozled myself at first. Raised the same objections—roof, level of earnings, established customs... But I came round to it in the end."

"No, no, I won't hear of it!" Pyotr Fomich cried, waving his hands at him with a frightened gesture. "You simply haven't gone into it properly. Take the safety instructions, for example ... here's the last circular from headquarters." He began frantically rummaging about in some files. "Or take the rules for conducting mining work. You'll find them in any text-book." He brought up all these books, circulars and regulations to reassure himself, but it had the opposite effect. They only frightened him all the more and he shouted: "No, no, I am emphatically against it, emphatically. It's a crazy idea ... impossible ... it can't be done!"

"Why not?" the Old Man suddenly uttered quietly. "I think it can."

Andrei turned to him swiftly, overjoyed.

"You think so?" he cried gratefully, and thought: "He's the real stuff, the Old Man!"

"I think it can. Why not?" the Old Man confirmed indifferently, and looked up at Andrei with sleepy eyes. "Is that all?" he asked.

"Er . . . yes. That's all."

"H'm. Well, well. Good-night, then!" he said abruptly, picking up a batch of papers. The interview was over.

Andrei was taken aback.

"But . . . but what about the record?" he asked blankly.

"Forget it!" the Old Man said sternly. "Hear that? Forget it!" he commanded, and turned his attention to the papers on his desk.

Victor exploded.

"What d'you mean—forget it? We can't forget it! I tell you, it's here!" he shouted, giving his chest a thump with his fist.

"And I tell you—forget it!" the Old Man repeated in a quiet voice. "Is that understood? I'll have no record attempts in my colliery, not while I'm alive!"

"Come, come, Ignatovich!" Prokop said indignantly. "That's not the way to talk. We haven't come to you with a request; we've come with a demand. You're not the only master at the mine. We're all masters."

"Then you're a poor master, my friend!" the Old Man said with a wry face. "A good master thinks of his dog, but you don't even think about the men! Ugh!" he said bitterly. "Shame on you! I can understand those fellows"—with a contemptuous jerk of his head towards the boys—"they're young, ambitious, want to make a noise in the world. But you're an old miner. One would expect you to think about your mates—"

"Who else am I thinking of?" the old man said, rather taken aback. "Not of myself, surely!"

The boys were puzzled too. "What have we done?" Andrei asked himself perplexedly. "It's not for ourselves . . . it's for the mine, for the common good!"

Svetlichny, with his quicker political intuition, seemed to see further than the others. He smiled and said blandly:

"Afraid of records, Gleb Ignatovich?"

The Old Man looked up at once. He didn't like Svetlichny. He had heard rumours about him, and his criticism of everyone at the mine. "Young cub," he thought. "A student. Out to make a career. They're all like that these days. Too clever by half!"

He scowled.

"I'm not afraid of anything, son," he said morosely. "I'm too old for that."

But Svetlichny did not seem to hear him.

"Afraid they'll step the plan up for you after the record?" he asked innocently, as though sympathizing with the Old Man.

"I'm not afraid of that either. The planners are clever men. Not hot-headed boys."

"You're afraid they'd put up the output rates?"

"I'm thinking of the men," the Old Man said with an impatient gesture, as if wishing to put a stop to this cross-examination.

"And what about the State?" Svetlichny asked quietly.

"The State," answered the Old Man with growing irritation. "We are the State—the working men, the miners. . . ."

"Quite right. And if the State gets richer, don't we, the miners, get richer too?"

"Yes. If the miners get richer the State'll be richer."

"Do you think the miners will be poorer after the record?"

Now, at last, Uncle Prokop, and Andrei and Victor began to see light.

"Ah, Gleb Ignatovich, Gleb Ignatovich!" Uncle Prokop cried, and his heart grew light and happy as though a stone had been lifted from it. "So that's what you're worrying about, you good old soul! We've considered that, too, you needn't worry. The miners' earnings will shoot up after the record. It's clear; the more coal you give, the more you'll get—"

"Who'll get it?" the Old Man snapped. "This one here"—with a jerk of his head towards Victor—"or that one there"—another jerk towards Andrei—"or three or four other smart young fellows. And what about the rest?"

"What's to prevent the rest from working well?" Andrei asked in genuine surprise. "Under our method work will be easier for everyone."

"You should line up with the leading workers, Comrade Manager, not with the laggards. You ought to back us," Victor said in a hurt tone.

"Back you? What for? You're well able to take care of yourselves from what I can see! Who's going to take care of the weak and raw ones if not me!"

"But that's *khvostism*, dragging at the tail, Gleb Ignatovich!" Svetlichny murmured, eyeing the Old Man steadily.

The Old Man, probably the first time for years, flew into a rage. He jumped up and smashed his great hairy fist down on the table.

"Ah! Khvostism?" he rasped. "So you've got your label ready? You're one of the smart ones, I see!" he shouted, glaring at Svetlichny with hatred.

His neck reddened and swelled so alarmingly that Pyotr Fomich feared the Old Man would have a stroke.

"Gleb Ignatovich!" he cried, darting up to him, but the Old Man pushed him away roughly. He had eyes for no one now but Svetlichny.

"Khvostism?" he snarled. "Why, you, you—" Words failed him, and he gasped for air. So that was what they accused him of now! Of taking care of the miners, his children. At least he never thought of himself. He needed nothing for himself—no fine house, no big money, no career. Think of that, you cheeky student! He lived in one room. He gave all his money away. He'd take nothing with him into the grave. Not a kopek of other people's money had ever stuck to his fingers. Everything went to them—the miners, his countrymen, his children.

The State? "Oh, the State won't be any the poorer," he reasoned, "it's rich enough."

Immersed in the petty cares of his colliery and his colliers he seldom gave a thought to the State. He saw it as a huge bag of gold. Formerly that bag belonged to the capitalists; now it belonged to the workers. That's what people made the revolution for and shed their blood, he among them. And now, too, he served the State as best he could. After all, it wasn't for himself he was producing coal! It was not as if he was a private boss or executive of some private boss!

Deep down in his crusted soul he thought of himself, perhaps unconsciously, as no more than the elected leader of a self-contained group of workers rather than a man whom the State had appointed to direct a State-owned colliery. And, as all such leaders, he tried to score over all the other groups, and pry loose from the State bag as much as he could for his own group.

He believed that was precisely what the miners loved him for. No wonder they called him father and benefactor! And he was proud of that love, which he prized higher than the love or respect of his superiors. There was nothing in the world he feared more than being accused of having grown too big for his boots. That is why he lived in a bare single room, refused the office turn-out he was entitled to, never went to health resorts, and distributed

the bonuses equally among all, to each a crumb, forgetting no one but himself.

A propagandist from headquarters, noticing this, once asked out of curiosity: "What is your idea of socialism, Gleb Ignatovich?" The Old Man was disconcerted. He seldom speculated on such abstract problems. He was a man of practical experience, but poorly educated. He had a good knowledge of the old mines, and that was about all he knew.

"Er. . ." he had muttered in reply. "Well, to my mind, socialism is . . . well, a fair deal, I daresay. Equality all round. . . ."

"That's to say, give the poor man the shirt off your back? Is that what you mean?"

"Something like that," the Old Man had said with a shrug. "You've no right to go sporting a shirt when your neighbour is naked."

"I see," the propagandist laughed. "Yours is a sort of socialism for beggars. Not equality, but a levelling down. No, Gleb Ignatovich, you're wrong!"

And he started explaining to him patiently, as he would to a schoolboy, how socialism was being built up in our country, and how communism, founded on abundance, would follow it. The Old Man had listened in silence without interrupting or protesting, merely shaking his head sceptically and thinking: "Ah, these golden-mouthed bookmen! But we sinners are living on the earth, poking about in a dunghill." And although he, like the propagandist, devoutly believed in the triumph of communism and had even shed his blood for it, it appeared to him as such a beautiful, noble, but remote dream that a man of his years would feel ashamed to dwell upon it in practical life.

It never occurred to him that living communism was sitting before him in the shape of these young innovators, and that he was trying to drive it out of his office, and,

what's more, felt insulted when he was called a khvostist, a dragger at the tail of progress.

He lowered himself wearily into his chair, feeling old and unappreciated.

He said without looking up at anyone:

"Go away. Go home, all of you."

The boys snatched up their caps, eager to get away from the sight of the Old Man's empurpling neck and the sound of his hoarse, laboured breathing.

But at this point Prokop Maximovich suddenly got up, full of wrathful dignity. Neither the Old Man's ire nor his authority daunted him. He drew himself up to his full height and said in an aggrieved but dignified tone:

"Very well. Let it go at that. But as far as I'm concerned this talk is not finished. We shall continue it at the Party meeting, Comrade Dyadok," he added, raising his voice slightly. "We shall talk there as Communists. This talk is no ordinary one. Come along, boys!" he shouted, and went out, slamming the door.

* 11 *

Dasha was waiting impatiently for the "delegation." She ran out to the wicket several times and looked down the road. In the dusk every passer-by seems to be the person you are waiting for, and disappointment grows into alarm with every fresh mistake.

"What can they be doing there so long?" Dasha thought anxiously. "Is it a good sign or a bad one? I can't believe that the Old Man will refuse. But what if he does?" A minute later she thought: "Oh, what difference does it make. They'll work as they worked before, that's all!" But she knew that it could no longer be "as before," and the uncertainty of the future worried her.

She was alone with her anxiety, all alone in the min-

ing town. No one else knew the reason for the group's visit to the Old Man; no one suspected that it might have a direct effect on the working lives of all of them.

The town's life ran its normal course in the gloaming. It was that quiet evening hour when people, home from their work, think mainly of their own private affairs—that late dinner hour of the collier and after-dinner relaxation. The family gathers together under the acacias. The children, tired with running about all day, sit quietly at their mother's knees. Sleepy Zhuchka crawls into his kennel under the porch. The fowls go to roost in the little shed.

The noisy herd of goats, the colliers' "cattle," straggle in from the hill-sides. The little nanny-goats, with drumming hoofs, scatter to their respective yards like frisky schoolgirls released from their lessons, and immediately become transformed from nameless dumb animals into lovable Daisies, Whities and Dusyas—the pets and friends of the miners' children. Dasha saw Manya-the-girl making a triumphal entry into the next-door yard astride Manya-the-goat. The little girl's father walked alongside, carefully supporting her by the shoulders. And all were happy—the elated little girl, the full-fed nanny, and most of all, the father, the whiskered drift-miner from Fyodorov's famous team. But he was no miner just now, nor a famous shock-worker—he was simply a happy father.

It is an hour when samovars start boiling merrily in hundreds of homes, and when the wisps of smoke from the samovar drift over the wattle fences and front gardens, and the sweetish smell of the charcoal reminds the miners not of the pit where they had spent all day hewing coal, but of childhood—the woods, the campfires of the horse grazers, the curling mists over the river. At this hour, the peasant re-awakens in every miner, even the most settled. The call of the land is irresistible. To satisfy that hunger the miner has his vegetable garden,

his flower bed, or just a narrow strip of land round the cottage. Elderly coal-hewers, timberers and engine drivers crawl about the garden beds till nightfall, sucking their dead pipes, puttering around the little bushes, breathing the fresh young smells of seedlings. In this they find their relaxation.

At this hour the sweet violet breaks into sudden blossom, and its heady perfume spreads over the little town, knocking at the hostel windows, raising a happy tumult in every heart. The girl putters, graders and haulage plate-girls start rushing about their rooms. They have already discarded their coarse dungarees and have become transformed into trim, dainty girls, eager for happiness. They dash about the corridors with irons and curling tongs, hastily press their ribbons, bows and blouses, and flutter out of the hostel in small flocks to go "club-walking" on Office Street, as they had recently gone "club-walking" on the village green.

In short, everyone in the mining town was preoccupied with his own private thoughts at that enchanted hour, dreaming of happiness, seeking it, finding it, losing it, hoping again to find it. And there were as many kinds of happiness as there were people.

At that hour Dasha alone stood thinking not of herself, but of her father and the boys who had gone to see the Old Man, not for their own, but for the common good.

She waited at the wicket gate, fretting, and finally grew vexed with herself. "What am I worrying myself to death for? What do I care for their records! I've got a hard enough winter ahead for myself. I'll be going away soon."

But she could not keep her thoughts off the business about which her father and her comrades had gone to see the Old Man; she could not help worrying about the outcome of their interview. If the people in the town only knew what they had gone for, what they were fighting for and proposing, they would have quit their gardens and

their goats and all their private little concerns and stood at their wickets, as Dasha did now, impatiently waiting for the return of their "delegates."

At last her father came back—alone. Dasha rushed up to him joyously, but he pushed her aside, as though fearing questions. Then, with a gesture of annoyance, he went into the house. It was borne in on Dasha that their visit to the Old Man had been a failure.

For the moment she was bewildered. "What now?" she thought.

Then suddenly she grew angry, not with the dense Old Man, but with the boys. "Ugh, the duffers! They couldn't explain the thing properly!" she thought with contempt.

"Ah, why didn't I go myself! I'd have shown him—" She went into the house, simmering. Her father was shouting angrily in the kitchen. Then he flew out, snatched up his cap and left the house.

"Like a bear with a sore head!" Mother said with a rueful smile. "As if it's my fault." She drew her woolly white shawl about her with a little shiver and added with humorous feminine resignation: "These men are all the same—if anything goes wrong in the pit they take it out on their wives. . . What about having some tea, daughter?" she said with a sigh.

But Dasha could not sit at home either.

"I'm going out, Mamma," she said resolutely.

"Where to?" her mother asked in surprise.

"Oh, I'll go and see people."

She threw a shawl over her shoulders and ran out into the street. "Go and see people"—that defined exactly her immediate course of action. She could understand her father. It was impossible to stay at home.

She went to the club. It was boisterously gay there, and she arrived just when the dancing started. Mitya Zarkorko, curly-headed, bubbling with mischief, rushed up in his red sport shirt, did some steps in front of Dasha,

seized her and whirled her off. Dasha had the impression that she had suddenly landed in the middle of a camp-fire—everything in Mitya was flaming: his shirt, his gold-red mop of hair, his cheeks and eyes. Dasha wrenched herself out of his clutches and made her escape from this wild colliers' dance. Mitya guffawed. Neither Andrei, nor Victor, nor Svetlichny were at the club.

Dasha went to the Colliery Party Committee, but the boys were not there either; nor were they at the Komсомol Committee nor the Trade Union Committee, nor on Office Street, nor in the cinema in the summer garden.

Not until now, after she had run herself off her feet, did Dasha admit to herself that she was looking for the boys. "What for?" she asked herself, and answered: "To give them a piece of my mind. Won't I give it to them hot!" But the longer she looked for them, the more alarmed she grew. If she ran into them now she would fling her arms about their necks. And then pitch into them for not having taken her to see the Old Man, for having bungled the whole thing, the idiots!

"Where the devil are they hiding?" she thought, rushing on. "They can't be sitting at home, surely?" She had a sudden vision of the boys pacing up and down their lonely den in grim silence, smoking the air blue, blundering from corner to corner and burying their fond dreams in dismal sepulchral silence—Victor his dream of fame, Andrei his dream of love, and Svetlichny his dream of a great new development.

"Let me get at them! I'll shake them up. Fancy being in the dumps, as if all were lost!" she thought, making her way to the hostel where the boys lived. She had never visited them, but she knew where the hostel was. "I'll drag 'em off tomorrow to the Old Man, to the Town Party Committee, to the Trust. You can't let a thing like this be thrown away!" She was not walking now, she was running down the street. Fancy losing heart, giving up

hope! She'd take things into her own hands now. Damn it all—! If only she were a boy, she'd raise hell! Set a record herself, she would!

"In what room does Andrei Voronko live?" she pounced on the care-taker who sat dozing in the corridor next to the water boiler.

The old woman woke up with a start and gave her the necessary directions.

Dasha wrenched the door open and burst into the room. She stopped short—the boys were not there.

She was at her wit's end. How vividly she had pictured it all—her bursting into the smoke-ridden den like a gust of fresh wind from the hills, like the Fire-Fly in the gloom of the pit, shouting from the threshold: "Hey, all hands on deck!" And here she was now, in an empty room.

Not quite empty, though. A girl got up in confusion at her precipitate entrance. She was a stranger to Dasha, a slim dainty girl in a filmy lilac-coloured blouse. "Funny, her eyes are brown," it flashed through Dasha's mind. "They should be blue."

"Good evening," she faltered. "Er ... there's no one here?"

"No," the girl said shyly. "I just happened to ... er ... to look in." She coloured deeply.

"What is she doing here?" Dasha thought, not knowing whether to go away or stay and wait. But where could the boys be? She was beginning to get nervous about them.

"Do you know whether they've been here at all this evening?" she asked, and her voice shook. The brown-eyed girl turned pale.

"No. Why, has anything happened?" she asked, her heart in her mouth.

"Why, it's Vera!" Dasha suddenly guessed. "It's Vera, my 'rival.'" She recollected Victor having teased Andrei about her and smiled. "She's sweet, I must say,

and pretty." She took another look. The girl stood before her, nervously pressing an embroidered shirt to her breast. "Probably embroidering Andrei's shirt. So she really loves him? And that bunch of flowers on the table must be from her too."

"No. I don't think anything has happened to them," Dasha said. "May I sit down?" She no longer wanted to go away.

"Oh, I'm so sorry!" Vera said quickly, drawing up a chair. "Sit down, please."

"Didn't Andrei tell you anything about his going to see the Old Man?"

"See who? No, he didn't tell me anything."

Dasha thought: "He doesn't love her in the least! Probably she doesn't even know about the record." Somehow the thought was not unpleasant.

"I suppose you are Dasha Lesnyak?" Vera asked suddenly in a low voice.

"Yes," Dasha was surprised. "Why, do you know me?"

"No . . . but I guessed as much," Vera said in confusion.

"I suppose Andrei has been telling you about me?" Dasha smiled. The next moment she got angry. This was something new! Poor child, she was no doubt suffering, jealous. Good heavens, who wanted that flap-eared Andrei of hers? She was welcome to him. He couldn't even say the right thing to the Old Man!

"No, he didn't tell me anything about you!" Vera said quietly and smiled sadly. "He's not very talkative."

Andrei had not told her anything about Dasha. He hardly spoke to her at all, and she was used to it. She was glad, if anything, that he was so silent. Had he spoken to her she would have been thrown into confusion, and he would then have seen what a silly little thing she was. No, she preferred his silence, so long as he did not scowl at her or drive her away.

But just now she was thinking jealously: "He doesn't keep silent with this Dasha. He talks about everything with her!" She stole a furtive glance at Dasha. "Of course she's clever, beautiful, a city girl. She's studying in Moscow. He loves her." Suddenly she felt miserable, utterly miserable. No one had ever told her about Dasha and Andrei's love for her, but she knew it herself, she had felt it a long time. She could not understand whence that knowledge had come, but with that knowledge the naive little girl became a woman who loved and was ready to fight for her love.

Her thoughts were drawn back to Andrei. She had not discovered yet what had happened to him.

"Please don't conceal anything from me," she said to Dasha hurriedly. "What is the matter with Andrei?"

"Nothing whatever!" Dasha said with annoyance. "He's a chump, your Andrei!" On a sudden impulse she started a rambling account of the events of that evening—the idea of the record and the failure to win over the Old Man to it.

Vera listened in silence. There was a good deal she could not understand in this incoherent story; besides, Dasha flaunted a technical vocabulary that was almost beyond her; but two things were now plain to her—Andrei was in trouble, and this girl did not love him.

"So she doesn't love him?" thought Vera, and, oddly enough, the discovery gave her no pleasure. It offended her. She felt hurt for Andrei's sake. "But how can anyone not love him?" She stood appalled. "And how he loves her! What's he going to do?" At that moment she was prepared to forgo all the claims of her own devoted love.

Just then loud steps were heard out in the corridor, the door was flung open and Svetlichny, Andrei and Victor burst into the room. They presented a strange appearance.

Victor was drunk. Or rather he was in that mellow condition of addled helplessness and maudlin good humour best described by the word "fuddled."

Often a man's behaviour when drunk is the exact opposite of his usual behaviour when sober. A cheerful man will grow sullen, a silent man will become garrulous. So it was with Victor. Usually mischievous and impudent when sober, he grew gentle as a lamb, even tearful, under the influence of drink. He wanted to fall on people's necks, go down on his knees to them, ask their forgiveness for something or other. All men seemed good to him and he was the only bad one.

"Sorry, folks, but I've had a drink!" his whole tousled, amiable aspect and sheepish smile seemed to say. "Awfully sorry, but there you are."

But Svetlichny and Andrei were least of all inclined to forgive him. Straightforward and ruthless, like all young people, they could not understand this "sin" and had no sympathy for the sinner. True, after the failure of their mission, they all felt crushed and out of sorts, and wanted to "let off steam." Too unexpected was the Old Man's refusal, too baffling his motive.

"There!" Svetlichny had said cheerlessly. "An object lesson in history—the dead clutching the living by the legs."

However, neither to him nor to Andrei did it occur to "let off steam" in a pub.

"Never mind!" Svetlichny had said with a shake of his shaggy head. "We're not all dead men!"

They had parted with Uncle Prokop at the corner and gone home in silence. On the way Victor had disappeared in the dusk.

After a search, his friends had found him in the pub by the railway station. Victor had been "letting off steam,"

sitting in a hilarious company, bawling: "‘The rushes murm-u-ured, the trees bent l-o-o-ow....’" The sight of Svetlichny had an instant sobering effect upon him. The company subsided too, quelled by Svetlichny's dark, forbidding look.

"Setting records, eh?" he rasped, scowling at the long row of empty beer bottles. Then suddenly he seized Victor by the scruff of his neck and hoisted him out of his chair.

"Don't hit him! Don't!" cried Andrei, rushing up to his friend.

Svetlichny did not hit him. He merely shook Victor with such violence that the whole world began reeling and dancing in his eyes. Then Svetlichny dragged him out into the street. Victor was grinning beatifically. The world, even a reeling one, was beautiful all the same, and his pals, even if they did handle him roughly, were the best and kindest pals alive. He was the only one of the trio who was serenely happy, but no one envied him.

Andrei had never seen his friend in such a pitiful state. They both belonged to a generation of miners who no longer considered drunkenness a deed of valour. Drunkenness was beastliness, nothing more. The drooling Victor was a sickening sight, and for the first time Andrei felt aversion towards him.

Disgusted, they dragged Victor off to the hostel. And there, as luck would have it, were the girls. Curbing their tongues, the boys piloted Victor to the bed and sat him down on it.

"Sit there, damn you!" Svetlichny snapped at him, and, turning to the girls, muttered gloomily: "Good evening." Like Andrei, he felt ashamed of his comrade.

"Good evening," Dasha said icily. She stood with her hands folded on her breast and her lips pressed tight together, the very image of her mother when Dad came home in his cups. "A fine lot!" she added with an annihilating glance at Andrei—not at the drunken Victor. She

was boiling over. "What a fool I was!" she thought, biting her lips. "Came rushing over here to comfort them and cheer them up. They've found comfort quick enough!"

Meanwhile, Victor the culprit sat on his bed with a carp-like grin on his face. He realized that he had done something wrong, but he felt light-hearted and happy. It was such a wonderful change from the mood of some three hours ago. He included the whole world in his affection, and life itself was so clear and simple, with nothing to bother your head about.

"My dearies, you sweet things. . . ." he said with tender emotion, looking at the girls, then suddenly winked at them. The next minute his face clouded and he said: "I'm a pig!"

"Never mind that! Shut up!" Andrei interrupted him with a grimace of disgust.

"*I am a pig!*" Victor asserted proudly. "Tell you why?"

He felt bound to explain things so that these nice people should not be vexed by any misunderstandings. He got up and took a step towards the girls, but lurched and nearly fell.

"Sorry!" he said, clutching the bed rail. "Haven't offended anybody, have I?"

"Lie down!" Svetlichny, now thoroughly exasperated, shouted at him.

"What for?" Victor was surprised. "Why should I? Such nice company and me going to sleep? Haven't offended anybody, have I? Sorry if I have."

He made another movement towards Dasha, and she darted back with disgust. Victor did not notice it, however. He thought everyone was dying to know what had made him drink. His jubilant glance travelled over the gloomy troubled faces of his comrades and alighted on Vera's. The girl's compassionate eyes were filled with tears.

"Had a drink, see?" he said to her. "Tell you why?" He spread his hands, as though he couldn't believe it himself. "Because I've become a pig." He gave a joyous cackle. "That's why! Wanted to fly up to the sky like an eagle, see? And the Ol' Man poked my nose in the mud." He laughed again. "Snipped my wings off, click." He imitated the sound of scissors and burst into inane laughter which struck a chill in everyone's heart. He thought they all found it very amusing. "The Ol' Man gave me to understand—you will never become an eagle you coal-hagger, because you're a swine! Well, so I went out to drown my sorrows." He winked and was on the point of going off into another peal of drunken laughter but suddenly pulled up short.

It all came back to him in a rush—all that had happened to him that evening, all that he had tried to forget in the hilarious company of strangers. He thought he had drowned it all at the bottom of the beer mug, but it rose up again from the dregs and made him feel sick. Curse them! What had they gone and done to Victor Abrosimov, the first-class coal-cutter, to rob him of joy and peace!

"Help! Murder!" he said in a whisper, and suddenly sat down on the floor and began to cry.

It was so unexpected that everyone was confounded. Andrei rushed up to him impulsively and took him by the shoulders.

"What's the matter, Vitya? Pull yourself together! Get up, do!" he coaxed him.

But Victor sat on the floor, weeping bitter maudlin tears.

Even Svetlichny was at a loss.

Dasha stepped forward and took matters in hand.

"Now then, get up!" she rapped out. "You fool!"

He looked up at her in astonishment, but stopped crying.

"You fool!" she repeated, then shouted at him: "Come on, get up!"

He meekly complied and held up his hands for some reason or other. And so he stood confronting her, hands upraised in surrender.

She knew now what she had to do.

"Take your jacket off!" she commanded.

Uncomprehending, but smiling, he took off his jacket. Dropped it on the floor. Then put his hands up again.

"Now the boots!" Dasha ordered.

Holding on to the bed rail and hopping about on one foot, he began taking his boots off. He thought it was a game and entered readily into the spirit of it.

"Which bed is his?" Dasha asked meanwhile, and, upon being told, she swiftly threw the blanket back.

"Here you are!" Victor said proudly, offering her one of his boots.

"Now your shirt and trousers. Make it snappy!" Dasha commanded.

Vera coloured and turned away. Victor stared all round the company in perplexity, as though asking whether this was one of the rules of the game and was meant to be obeyed.

"Come on!" Dasha shouted impatiently, and he hastily complied.

Dasha watched him indifferently. In shorts and singlet, he looked like an athlete. He had a fine strong physique, which looked magnificent even in the tipsy state he was in. Any other girl would have noticed it. But Dasha did not. She merely saw that he was drunk and had to be put to bed.

"Well!" She stamped her foot. "Off to bed!"

"What for?" Victor suddenly jibbed. "I don't want to!"

Nevertheless he was completely in her power.

"Why should I?" he repeated, this time rather uncertainly.

Flushed with victory, amazed and thrilled at the sense of her power over him, and already forgiving him in her heart, she watched him go, lurching, up to the bed.

Of course he submitted only because he was tipsy. He didn't want to hurt anyone's feelings. He was crushed with a sense of guilt. He was helpless and pitiful. His pals despised him for it, but Dasha didn't—she pitied him.

He meekly went over to his bed. He wasn't at all sleepy. He hadn't got everything off his chest yet, hadn't explained things properly. The fact that he wasn't an eagle still needed explaining. But Dasha. . . . Suddenly he cocked an eye knowingly. This is what he would do—he'd outwit her. Pretend he was sleeping. That's it. He hadn't insulted anyone, had he? By all means, he'd go to bed.

He got into bed and even pulled the blanket over his head, but the next instant he popped his head out and cried:

"I'm sleeping, see?" To leave no doubts about it he shut his eyes tight.

The next instant he really was asleep.

His friends could hardly believe it. He fell asleep like a tired child who had been playing all day. His face was bland and innocent as a baby's with soft moist parted lips and long eye-lashes like a girl's. It looked pale and sweet. Only then did Dasha realize for the first time that Victor was handsome.

"Yes, he looks nice when he's asleep!" Svetlichny said, as though reading Dasha's thoughts. "You're splendid, Dasha! Well, well!" He shook his head wonderingly. "The way you tamed him!"

She laughed in confusion and glanced lovingly, almost maternally, at the sleeping Victor. He made such funny little noises with his nose, and smacked his lips, just like a child.

"I'll be going along. Excuse me," Vera suddenly said nervously. She had been feeling terribly uncomfortable all the time, and now hastened to get away. No one detained her, and she all but fled from the room.

"What's the matter with her?" Svetlichny said in astonishment.

Then he glanced at Andrei and Dasha, and he knitted his bushy eyebrows. "H'm, time I interfered here, too!" he thought with a sigh. He could not help interfering even in the private affairs of his friends.

"I'll be going too!" said Dasha. "Will you see me off, Andrei?"

Andrei nodded in silence.

They went out of the hostel and started down the street.

"Don't be angry with Victor," Andrei said quietly. "He didn't mean anything, he's not a drunkard—"

"I don't blame him!" Dasha said hotly. "In his place I'd have smashed all the Old Man's windows for him."

"We went to the Old Man for nothing," Andrei said reluctantly. "He's a stick-in-the-mud."

"Really?"

"Yes. Of the worst kind."

"And you're a go-ahead, I suppose?" she asked mockingly.

"Me? Yes," he answered simply, "I'm a go-ahead. I think of the State."

Dasha gave him a sidelong look, but abstained from sarcastic comment. She was wondering—could this be the same Andrei, who only six weeks ago had carried her suit-case for her from the station! She had thought him such a gawky, ungainly, and in fact, rather stupid lad. What had come over him? She wouldn't be surprised if he put her down as a stick-in-the-mud too.

"We should have gone straight to Nechayenko, the Party organizer," Andrei said, as though talking to himself

"But he's away just now.-He's on leave."

"He'll be coming back."

"D'you think he'll support you?"

"I'm sure of it!" Andrei said confidently. "How could it be otherwise! We're proposing something useful."

"Ah, well!" Dasha shrugged. "Blessed is he who believes!" She was contradicting now through sheer perversity. What, allow him to get the upper hand of her? Not if she could help it! He was in love with her—everyone knew that—but she . . . she hadn't decided yet. So she still had the upper hand!

"Don't you believe the Party organizer will back us?" Andrei asked in a tone of concern. "Why?"

"It all depends," she answered evasively, for want of a better answer. "You mustn't take things for granted. You must always be prepared for the worst," she wound up on a note of triumph.

"Do you believe in communism? In world revolution?"

"What's that got to do with it?" she said, nettled.

"No!" he said, shaking his head. "You must always believe in what is good!"

He said this with manly simplicity. Oddly enough, coming from him, she resented it. But then she was herself more of a boy than a girl. She could not tolerate being protected and comforted, and had no need for support. She dreamed of becoming a support herself to the man she loved.

Suddenly she recalled Victor curled up in bed, poor fellow, with a pained childish smile on his lips. Here was a man who would always be stumbling and erring, who would always be in need of support, comfort, and guidance.

In the middle of August Nechayenko, the Steep Maria Party organizer, returned from his holidays. That same day he attended the arranging of the second shift's stints. Svetlichny, acting for Prokop Maximovich, who was suddenly taken ill, made the Partorg's acquaintance here for the first time.

"Two young men here are dying to see you, Comrade Nechayenko," he said with a broad smile.

"Who?"

"Andrei Voronko and Victor Abrosimov."

"Ah! What is it about?"

"They've got some big idea. Want to consult you about it."

"Big idea, eh? What's it about?" Nechayenko said, his interest roused. "Send them in."

"But won't you be taking a rest after your journey?"

"All right, tomorrow then."

They made arrangements for a meeting, but that same evening Nechayenko unexpectedly turned up at the hostel. The boys were astonished when they saw him in the doorway.

"Are you 'at home' to me, boys?" he cried cheerfully. "Just dropped in on the chance. May I?"

"Why yes, come in!" Andrei said, overwhelmed.

Nechayenko entered, accompanied by Uncle Onisim, and seemed to fill the whole room, although he was of medium height, slim, well-knit and agile.

"It's ages since I've been here!" he said cheerfully. "You haven't married yet, boys? High time you did. Fellows like you, rolling in money. Ah, the roof's leaking, I see!" he added, glancing at the wet stain on the ceiling. "That's too bad, Uncle Onisim! I'm afraid I'll have to tackle you one of these days."

"Now, now, please, Comrade Nechayenko," Uncle

Onisim said, somewhat taken aback. "And everybody says you're such a good kind man." He shuffled about, then tactfully withdrew.

Nechayenko, meanwhile, was examining his hosts' "library"—a few dog-eared volumes and a dozen or so technical handbooks and works of reference.

"Not exactly crowded out with culture, are you?" he said, thumbing the books. "You fellows surprise me—rich coal-cutters like you, and you can't buy yourself decent books. What are you spending your money on?"

He had come as a guest but felt himself at home. Such was ever his way. He radiated vitality, and it was a pleasure to look at him. There was the tang of the sea about him. In his duck suit, sports cap and white shoes he looked anything but a Party organizer, still less a colliery Partorg. At the moment he was just a breezy, friendly hail-fellow-well-met.

Such men often find themselves in the role of spokesmen and ringleaders as a matter of course, sometimes against their own will. They are always at the centre of things. Even on holidays, in the sanatoriums, they become organizers of excursions, picnics and games, instigators of joint protests if the cooking falls below standard, leaders of the movement to abolish "quiet hour" after dinner, and so on. A month's holiday often tires them out more than six months of work. Voice or no voice, they take the lead in every chorus.

"I've come to hear what you have to say," Nechayenko said, moving away from the "library." "I've been told you fellows have hatched some idea—"

"You couldn't call it that," Andrei said embarrassedly. "More like a hunch, I should say."

"Well, whatever it is, out with it!" Nechayenko said, sitting down by the table and resting his elbows on it.

Svetlichny studied him closely all the time. The Partorg impressed him, despite the holiday finery. Svetlichny

knew that Nechayenko was not the simple, bluff, happy-go-lucky fellow he appeared to be at first glance. He had heard a good deal about him, especially from Prokop Maximovich, who had for long been a member of the Town Party Committee. "Nechayenko's a fighter!" Uncle Prokop had said affectionately and respectfully. To Svetlichny this characteristic was the most important: he could not stand mild, wishy-washy workers. He preferred the tough kind. And Nechayenko was evidently of that kind. People always looked forward keenly to his speeches at Party plenums and conferences. One thing they knew—they would not be bored. They also knew that he was afraid of nothing and nobody on earth, that he would never dodge an issue and could never be side-tracked. Nothing could check him, not even the frown of the First Secretary, nor the grieved look of the Second.

Our people prefer a hard-hitting word by far to a witty one. Nechayenko was not a wit in the accepted sense. Neither was he a first-rate speaker. His speeches lacked the polish of premeditated witticism, picturesque phrase and allusion. This, however, was abundantly compensated by the fire and sincerity of a man who had the interests of the common cause close at heart. His speeches had to be heard, not read.

"The idea's a simple one," Andrei said irresolutely. "I don't know really how to explain it—"

"We're dissatisfied!" Victor said moodily. "We haven't got enough scope."

"Who hasn't?" Nechayenko asked.

"The coal-cutters, of course!"

"To make a long story short, the boys have planned a small revolution at the working face," inserted Svetlichny.

"A bloodless one, I hope?"

"Who knows! We tried the 'parliamentary' way, but nothing came of it."

"Well, let's hear all about it!" Nechayenko said. "If

there's any blood-letting to do, we'll do it! Well?" He leaned his body forward, waiting for them to begin.

The boys looked at each other.

"You'd better speak, Fyodor," Andrei muttered with a sigh. "You're good at it."

"Very well!" And Svetlichny gave a detailed account of the record idea.

"Wait a minute!" Nechayenko suddenly interrupted him in a surprised tone. "Why, but it's simple!"

"Nothing simpler!" Svetlichny smiled.

"It's no more than an elementary division of labour. Do I understand you right?"

"That's right!"

"Yes, it's certainly simple!" Nechayenko repeated in a puzzled tone, rubbing the bridge of his nose in his agitation. "Have you talked it over with the colliery manager?"

"We have."

"And with the chief engineer?"

"With him too."

"And what did they say?"

Svetlichny merely shrugged his shoulders.

"The chiefs didn't support us," Victor said gloomily.

"Why not?"

"They're afraid. They don't know themselves what of."

"I see. So the world's pundits are against you? And you don't want to submit, eh?"

"How can we, Nikolai Ostapovich?" Victor cried.

"A bunch of impudent young fellows, eh?" smiled Nechayenko. "Here, let's have some more details of this plan of yours." He began questioning them rigorously, demanding ever new details and making them repeat their answers over and over again in an endeavour to probe to the bottom. The boys answered his questions with alacrity. The thing stood out clear, simple and convincing. It was the simplicity of it that disconcerted him. "If it's so simple

and obvious, why didn't anyone think of it before?" he mused. Maybe there was a catch to it somewhere, a catch which any engineer, any technician or even an experienced old miner would easily detect—a catch which he could not see because he was not a specialist.

That was it—he was no specialist. He was neither a miner nor an engineer. He would often remark with rueful irony: "My education is elementary—incomplete elementary." This was a raw spot with him.

Nechayenko was from the Black Sea coast, the son of a Balaklava fisherman, and a fisherman himself. He was even christened Nikolai, after St. Nicholas, the patron saint of seamen. The Civil War interrupted his schooling, and he never finished the elementary course. But that did not grieve him much at the time. A fishing smack with wind-filled sails offered him more alluring horizons.

Then he joined the Komsomol. He joined it at a time when all sails were set in a northerly direction. Nikolai Nechayenko found himself in Leningrad, a student of the Workers' Faculty. Somewhere in the offing loomed the profession he dreamt of—that of a ship-builder.

At that time the Party's appeal went out for twenty-five thousand volunteers to go out and work in the countryside. Although it did not apply to students, the appeal was hotly discussed in the students' hostels. The volunteers were envied. Nikolai Nechayenko could not resist the clarion call of the Party. Consciousness had little part in it. He simply obeyed an impulse. Every day he read in the newspapers about class battles in the countryside. There had been casualties already and blood had been shed. And Nechayenko volunteered.

He became a rank-and-file soldier of collectivization—first a propagandist, then a cooperative organizer, and finally chairman of a rural Soviet. The village became his university, his school of life and struggle. He never once regretted having given up the Workers' Faculty for this

life. But as time went on he became keenly aware of the need for continuing his education. The village boys at the seven-year school had already outstripped him. A chance to attend farm mechanization courses turned up, and he snatched at it. If he wasn't going to be a ship-builder, he could be a mechanizer, he decided. And he threw himself avidly into his studies. The men in charge of the courses, however, proved to be dead timber. Nechayenko straight-away flung himself into a new fight. It was a fierce scuffle, but he emerged the victor. He was elected Secretary of the local Party organization, and two months later he was acting as Instructor at the Town Party Committee.

"I was much too active, that's what ruined me!" Nechayenko afterwards confessed with a laugh. "I should have kept in the shade!"

The same thing happened again when he got his third chance of studying, this time at the Regional Party School. He solemnly swore to keep in the shade, to sit quiet as a mouse, but all in vain. It was not his way. Once he ventured a few words at a Party meeting. He attracted attention. The Town Party Committee happened to be badly in need of an able, honest man for local industry. "You'll finish your education later," Nechayenko was promised. He submitted. At the next reshuffling of personnel he was transferred to the railway Political Department, and thence to the coal industry. He was considered an efficient, competent and promising worker, but Nechayenko sorrowfully saw himself being transformed into a full-time functionary, pure and simple. True, he acquired special experience and developed into a resourceful and efficient organizer with a flair for grasping things quickly. On every new job he conscientiously studied the business and technique, spending night after night over books and works of reference. But he lacked the grounding of school knowledge which no intuition or talent could

make up for. He was painfully and disturbingly aware of it himself. He hated himself for these unbidden thoughts. "Who am I to complain? I'm a rank-and-file soldier of the Party. The Party knows best where I'm to stand, to fight and to die!"

Deep down in his heart, however, he realized that uneducated warriors, no matter how devoted, were now of little use to the Party. Today qualified Communist-engineers, Communist-agriculturists and Communist-scientists were needed most of all. Cadres decided everything. Educated men were required on the committees, too. You couldn't be a leader of men with an "unfinished elementary." How keenly he felt that now! Ah, if only he were an engineer! How he would have supported these eager young men, who were planning a "revolution at the pit face!" What a help he could have been to them!

And help them he must! His long experience as a Party worker, quick to respond to all that was new and advanced, told him that the boys were right; the best part of it was that they had conceived the idea and proposed it themselves. "That means they're state-minded, that's what is most important! And how boldly they think!"

"Look here, comrades," he said earnestly. "I have a feeling that this idea of yours is a good one. I don't know whether it will work, but I believe in it. I do, with all my heart."

"Thanks, Nikolai Ostapovich!" Andrei cried enthusiastically.

"It's for me to thank you," Nechayenko answered. "Now this is what we'll do, boys! I'll try another talk with the Old Man and the chief engineer. And tomorrow evening I'll go up to the T.P.C. and see Comrade Rudin. Or, better still, Comrade Zhuravlyov. He's in charge of coal. Let me have all the details once more."

He sat on for another hour and a half and went away when it was quite dark.

It so happened that Nechayenko had no need to go up to the T.P.C. Rudin came down to the Steep Maria himself early in the morning, and, as usual, went straight to the stint assignment room. The Party secretary always went there directly he came to the colliery—such was the time-honoured custom.

The stint room occupies such a peculiar place in the life of every pit and every miner that it is rather difficult to describe. Officially, it is the place where the overmen, their assistants and the deputies gather three times during the twenty-four hours to assign duties to the shift that happens to be taking over. Here the roll-call is made, and stints are assigned to the shift, indicating where each man is to work and how much he is to do. In the old collieries the stint room is usually a large, longish hall, with a smoky ceiling, walls smudged by miners' backs, and a cement-paved floor covered with coal-dust and duff. Its most noteworthy feature is a wall with little windows cut into it. Behind those windows, in their little offices, sit the chiefs, while the miners crowd around them.

That wall once formed an impregnable barrier between two worlds—those who did the bossing and those who did the work, those who sat behind the windows and those who huddled timidly on the other side. Here, by this grim wall, outside those narrow impassive windows the usual monotonous dramas of the colliers' life were daily enacted; here the unemployed stood patiently for weeks on end, waiting for their "lucky chance" to get into harness; here men who had been dismissed or fined came to plead and beg; here the hungry breathed timid defiance; here widows wept, begging jobs for their children, and bowed humbly to the deaf wall, and made their children bow to it.

Today, although some windows still remain here and there, the wall, as a barrier, no longer exists. The miners

pass freely into the offices behind the wall, and sit down by the chief's desk to discuss their business, and the chiefs themselves are yesterday's miners or the children of miners. The stint room has been purged clean of the old slavish air charged with the bitter odours of want and humiliation, and the place itself looks cheerful and different. Not because its walls have been whitewashed—no matter how white they are the miners will soil them quickly with their dusty pit clothes—or because, thanks to the efforts of the club workers and the miners' wives, pictures, posters, a wall newspaper with caustic cartoons, and even flowers in tubs have appeared there. The difference goes deeper than that—everything at the mine, labour first and foremost, has undergone a complete change.

Stint assignment was no longer the daily process of harnessing hungry people to their gruelling work. It had become a peculiar and solemn ceremony, like the changing of the guards, or evening roll-call in a camp. The miner comes here now not merely to get his stint and go away. People on their holidays, missing their comrades and the mine, drop in here to learn the news. Pensioned old miners in their chair-days still come here by force of habit, or merely to mix with the living crowd.

Here the whole shift gathers together for the only time in the day before its members scatter over the pit to their lonely benches, seams and levels. Here in an hour one can talk one's fill to last through the long silence of the working, and smoke one's fill for the six-hour day. Here one can learn all the news and rumours, international and local, and all the market gossip. One can have a good long row with the deputy over wrongly recorded shift results and complain to the overman right on the spot. Here one can meet the colliery manager, or the Party organizer, or the Union Committee chairman, sometimes all three together, and have a talk with each if need be.

Here arrivals from headquarters—inspectors, correspondents and instructors—are sure to look in. At any moment the place is likely to be turned into a debating club, a meeting hall or a theatre where impromptu skits on loafers and braggarts are enacted to the general amusement. But even the meeting, should it arise, will be like no other meeting anywhere else. Here one can speak without even getting up from the floor on which one squats hewer-fashion, leaning against the wall. Here men speak without a flourish of rhetoric, offhand, and do not mince words. Here one need not make a speech at all, but just throw out a single word, and if it be an apt one, it may stick to a man for ever, become his nickname. Here criticism is harsh, fearless, straight from the shoulder. That is why certain chiefs are a little afraid to attend the stint assignments. But the miner will not throw out idle, boastful or untruthful words here, for his comrades will be quick to nail him to the facts.

Yet the stint room is not a club. People come here an hour before going down into the pit. They all wear their pit clothes. Each carries his tools and his lamp. They huddle round their team leader like soldiers round their squad commander before the battle. And everything they do and speak and think here hinges upon labour, for the sake of which they have gathered.

Such then is the stint room. To attend here and listen to what the miners think and want, is an unwritten law for every Party worker who visits the mine. That is why Rudin, the Secretary of the T.P.C., came to the Steep Maria so early and went directly to the stint room instead of going to the office, or to the mine Party Committee, or to Nechayenko's lodgings.

In the stint room he was immediately recognized.

"Look!" Andrei whispered to Svetlichny. "Rudin is here! See him over there, that big man."

But Svetlichny had already guessed who the man was.

Rudin was an imposing figure, tall and supple, with a shock of chestnut hair combed back over his head and already turning grey at the temples. He wore a khaki suit of military cut, consisting of a youthful tunic in place of the more solid jacket, and breeches and chrome leather top-boots. He had an arresting face, the face of an orator and leader: an aquiline nose, high forehead, and proudly poised head, slightly thrown back. He must have been extremely handsome in his youth. Now his features were somewhat heavy and flabby, but no less impressive. He had light-grey eyes, keen as a hawk's, and pouting lips, like a child's which he compressed, breathing hard through his nose, when angry or bored. His face was unwrinkled except for two deep creases at the mouth and one over the bridge of his nose, testifying either to strength of character or to the habit of authority.

Andrei eyed him with admiration. Everything now depended upon this man.

Rudin crossed to the middle of the room with a light step. He immediately became the centre of the crowd. The deputies and overmen looked out of their windows. "Another meeting, I suppose," the Old Man thought with annoyance, but he did not put his thought into words.

"Good morning, comrades!" Rudin greeted the men and glanced around him. "Ah, Prokhor Makarovich!" he hailed someone and waved his hand. "Hullo! Good morning, Trofim Yegorich!" He knew all the old worthies in the district and always addressed them by their name and patronymic. "Still going strong, Pyotr Filippovich?" he said, holding his hand out to Kandybin, the timberer, standing nearby.

"You'll dirty yourself!" the latter said shyly, showing his hands, which were soiled with coal-dust.

"That doesn't matter!" laughed Rudin. "Coal isn't ink. I don't like getting messed up with ink, but coal's different!"

Karnaukhov, leader of the wallers' team, squeezed his way through the crowd. It was said of him at the mine that he asked no better of life than to be able to rub shoulders with the chiefs.

"True for you, Comrade Semyon!" he sang out. "Hit the nail on the head! You won't dirty yourself with coal. And who's cleaner than the miner with his hot bath every day?"

"Quite right!" threw in Rudin. "We chiefs don't get into hot water until we're hauled over the coals at headquarters! Well, how are things going, how's production?"

"Things are not bad! Nothing to complain of!" Karnaukhov answered for all in his sugary old man's tenor; he used to sing in the church choir when a child. "We're fulfilling the plan, thank God, all of a hundred per cent."

"We can't complain, but we can't boast either!" a tall dour-faced miner, standing right in front of Rudin, interrupted him with a wry smile.

"What's that? What?" Karnaukhov bristled up.

"Aren't you pleased the way the plan's going, Comrade Zakorluka?"

"Plan! Call that a plan! Makes you feel cheap! People at the Sofia shaft are laughing at our plan."

"Ah! It's not big enough for you? You want a bigger one?"

"I want you to leave me alone, that's what I want!" Zakorluka said with a shrug, moving away from Karnaukhov.

"He's got a big appetite, he's going to get married!" Makivchuk cried out maliciously from somewhere amid the crowd. "He and his Katya have their own State plan."

"We all need more!" old Treukhov said sternly. "We're not working for a boss. You're quite right, Zakorluka! Tell 'em what you think."

"What's the use of talking, Comrade Secretary," Mitya Zakorko, with gleaming eyes, suddenly butted in. "If you want the truth, we're working at half strength. Either there's no air pressure, or else we have to sit and wait for the return tubs—"

"The tub tracks are bad, that's why," a man said, who, judging by the whip on his shoulder, was a horse-putter. "They should have been cleaned long ago—"

"A lot of mud, that's true!"

"But what about the air?" asked Mitya.

"And the timber, too? You'd think there wasn't enough timber in Russia!" someone shouted and broke into a laugh in which everyone joined.

"We've got a lot of ailments, Comrade Secretary! The trouble is there's no doctor."

"Wait a minute, let me speak," a thickset miner who had been standing slightly apart in stolid silence suddenly spoke up in a quiet voice.

His voice was heard.

"Go ahead, Ocheretin, let's hear you!" the men clamoured.

It was indeed Sergei Ocheretin. But one would hardly have recognized the old Sergei, "the blinker," in this dignified, respectable-looking miner. True, he still winked his left eye occasionally by force of habit, but he was a changed man. Nastya had rushed him into marriage, and the result was a model family man, slightly henpecked, but immensely proud of his new house. Every pay-day he went shopping arm in arm with Nastya, or mostly window-shopping, for they already possessed the main requisites for quiet family bliss in their home. They were proud of their fine bed with piles of cushions, mirrored wardrobe, oak sideboard, gramophone, bicycle, radio set and so on. Ocheretin's thoughts now ran to a piano. "The children will grow up and learn music!" The children—Lubka and Nadya, twins, were at present two years old.

Malicious tongues said he was greedy and was working his head off in the pit only for the sake of money. But that was not true. He was out for honour no less than he was for money. He was used to honour, and could not imagine work or life without the esteem of his fellow men. Ever since he saw his name—S. I. Ocheretin—on the honour board outside the check-gate, he lost his peace of mind. At first he feared they had put his name on the list “by mistake”—the mistake would be discovered and his name would be erased. Then he feared that other coal-hewers would outstrip him, that he would lag behind, and his name would be crossed off the board again. Even now he looked up at the board every day on coming to the shaft to see whether his portrait was still there. On the sideboard at home, on Nastya’s lace runners, there lay a fat plush album containing newspaper and magazine cuttings and pictures of the celebrated coal-hewer of the Steep Maria Colliery, S. I. Ocheretin. No, it wasn’t for money alone that Ocheretin worked so hard at the face. He also learned to speak at meetings, and made a dignified figure at the presidium table. He attended shock-worker rallies. Winking was the only old habit he couldn’t break himself of, although Nastya nagged him to death about it. She always had a suspicion he was winking to the girls from the presidium table.

“Yes, Comrade Ocheretin, what is it?” Rudin said affably, turning his whole body round to face him.

Ocheretin cleared his throat and began:

“Everything men say about the air, the timber and the tubs is right, Comrade Secretary. You ought to do something about it.”

“Very well!” smiled Rudin. “We’ll certainly bear that in mind.”

“But no one said a word about the main thing,” Ocheretin went on imperturbably. “And the main thing is that the coal-hewer can’t make headway at the Steep Maria!”

He paused amid an attentive silence.

"What do you mean?" Karnaukhov asked uneasily.

"I mean," said Ocheretin, "that our methods of working the coal are out of date. The system's no good, and it's just hell for the hewer. We cut coal by short benches. That's what is wrong."

"And what would you want," Karnaukhov asked mockingly. "A whole field?"

"I want the coal-hewer to have a free run," Ocheretin answered with dignity. "I've got nothing against benches. But you can't do much coal-getting in a small bench. Ask any of the hewers whether I'm right or not."

Andrei and Svetlichny exchanged glances.

"Well, I'll be damned!" Svetlichny whispered. "Good for old Sergei! Talk about a blinker!"

"Then we're not the only ones who are thinking about it!" Andrei thought joyously, and cried out:

"Bravo, Sergei!"

"Any man will tell you that," Ocheretin concluded calmly. "Give us a straight run and we'll give you twice the amount of coal."

"Ten times the amount!" came a strong, ringing voice.

It was Victor's. He was standing by one of the windows.

"Ten times?" Rudin queried. "Come on, let's hear you!"

"Yes, ten times as much!" Victor repeated excitedly. "I mean what I say. Sergei Ocheretin said here—'give me a longer stretch and I'll give you twice as much coal.' Right? And I say"—with a toss of his head—"give me the whole working face and I'll bring it down in a single shift!"

"All on your own?" Ocheretin gasped, staring at Victor dumbfounded.

"Yes, by myself!" Victor repeated proudly. At that moment he felt capable of doing anything.

Old Karnaukhov turned to him and asked with mock sympathy:

"Say, ducky, are you all right here?" and he tapped his forehead.

"Why, 'course he isn't!" Makivchuk threw in maliciously. "Heaven help him! Pride has turned his head."

Laughter shook the room.

"Well, well, Victor, that was a mouthful!"

"Aw, you don't know him—he's Ilya Muromets, the doughty knight of old!"

"Modest, isn't he?"

"The Ivan Poddubny* of Steep Maria!"

"Join the circus, Victor! You'll make big money."

Caustic comments flew from all sides.

It was one of those moments when the stint room became transformed into a theatre. And Victor stood his ground like an actor who had "got the bird" but refused to give way. His eyes gleamed with a yellow flame from under his miner's hat.

"We must back up Victor!" Svetlichny whispered, then shouted: "Let the man have his say!"

Rudin heard his voice amid the din and laughter.

"Quite right!" he said indulgently. "Let the comrade finish what he wanted to say."

The noise subsided.

"I say I could give ten times more coal!" Victor repeated with a scornful smile. "If you don't believe me, ask Andrei Voronko. He's got it planned."

"Ah, Andrei too!" a surprised ripple ran through the room. Everyone at the mine knew Andrei for a cautious, thoughtful and silent man.

"Let's hear Comrade Voronko!" said Kandybin.

* Poddubny—Name of a famous Russian wrestler.—*Tr.*

Andrei stepped shyly forward into the middle of the ring.

"As a matter of fact," he said hesitatingly, addressing himself chiefly to Rudin, "the thing hasn't been verified yet. So far it's just an idea. Ocheretin was right—we're working at half strength. We're called coal-hewers, but how long do we actually use the pneumatic hammer at the face? Not more than three hours a shift. And what do we do the rest of the time? Drag up the props, do the timbering and clear the place, while the hammer lies on the floor, getting no coal. That's why we make so little. I mean, just ordinary earnings. No matter how hard you try, you can't do more than a 150 per cent of your quota."

"That's a fact!" someone sighed aloud. The sigh was distinctly audible in the hushed room. Andrei heard it too. It heartened him. Just then he noticed Nechayenko pushing his way quietly through the crowd and smiling to him. Nechayenko had only just arrived. Andrei smiled back at him and continued his impromptu speech with more ease and confidence. "What we propose is to straighten out the wall, do away with the benches, and give the whole stretch to the hewer. Let him work it at full go, with the timberers setting the props as he goes along."

"What d'you mean?" old Kandybin interrupted him, nonplussed. "Let the timberer do the hewer's propping for him?"

"Yes. Why not?" Andrei answered. "Division of labour."

"But what about the earnings? Fifty-fifty?"

"Oh, no! You can't put a hewer on a par with a timberer!" Sergei Ocheretin said in an offended tone. "That's impossible!"

"That's just what I say!" Kandybin, in turn, took offence. "The timberer's the best qualified man in the pit."

"Who told you that, Gran'pa?"

"Oh, forget about the earnings!" Mitya Zakorko cried in exasperation. "Harping on it all the time! Here's a man proposing what may be a great thing for the mine, and you wail about earnings!" He turned quickly and impatiently to Andrei: "Give us the practical details. Don't keep us on tenter-hooks!"

Several voices supported him:

"Come on! Let's have the details!"

"We can't seem to get it straight. . . ."

"Speak up, Andrei. Explain yourself!"

Kandybin shook his head doubtfully:

"I'm afraid you're barking up the wrong tree, Andrei!" he said with a pained grimace as though pitying the hot-headed lad and regretting the necessity of having to bring him down a peg. "It doesn't make sense. We've been mine folk all our lives, but never heard of such a thing as a timberer doing a hewer's propping for him. . . ."

"It's just a fish story!" a harsh mocking voice came from somewhere near the wall. "Tell 'em about the blue hare while you're at it, Andrei!" Those standing by the wall laughed.

However, the gibes, ridicule and resistance did not have the effect on Andrei they usually have on a timid soul. They merely toughened his fighting spirit. He drew his head in as though bracing his muscles for a leap into the fray.

"Don't let the earnings worry you, Gran'pa Kandybin!" he said. "We miners get our living from the coal. The more we give the more we earn. Isn't that so?"

"That's true enough!" concurred Kandybin.

"Quite right, Andrei!" Svetlichny cried. "You tell folks how much coal can be got."

"We can figure it out," Andrei went on, encouraged by the remark. "How much coal does a hewer give now, all by himself? Ten tons, let's say, at the very most twelve. Isn't that so? But if he hitches up with the timberer the

way I propose, he'll be able to give fifty, if not seventy tons—"

"What?!" a gasp went up from those around him.

"Seventy!" Andrei repeated firmly and glanced at Rudin. The latter was talking to the Old Man in low tones, but Andrei caught the words.

"The kids are just larking about!" and he understood that the Old Man's remark applied to him and his proposal.

"Seventy?" stammered Sergei Ocheretin, pale with agitation. "D'you mean it seriously?"

"And I say we could give all of a hundred!" Victor cried excitedly.

"Why not a million?" said Karnaukhov. "Go ahead, lad, count in millions. Why fiddle with hundreds."

"Dear me, what high-flyers there are these days!" Kandybin said, shaking his head.

"Didn't I tell you, boys, it was the yarn about the blue hare!" the same mocking voice came from the wall, and the men there laughed again.

And then a new masterful voice broke in.

"You'd do better to listen first before laughing a fellow down!" And Nechayenko stepped into the circle where Andrei, Rudin and the Old Man were standing. "First listen, and then discuss it," Nechayenko added more calmly, going up to shake hands with Rudin.

"You have interesting people at the Maria," Rudin said to him with a smile. "Arguing, making a noise. And what is most important of all—thinking! That's what's really valuable!" He suddenly consulted his watch and said hastily: "I planned to be at the Sofia today. What's the name of that lad?"—pointing to Andrei.

"Andrei Voronko."

"Ah! Thanks." Rudin took a step forward and everyone fell silent, understanding that he wanted to speak. "Look here, Comrade Voronko," Rudin said amiably, laying

his hand on the boy's shoulder. "I listened to your proposal with great interest. I listened to all of you, comrades, with interest!" he added, addressing the crowd. "It's a good thing that you think about coal. I mean, how to get more of it and give the country more of it. Splendid thoughts! Your mine is one of the leading mines in the district, and your people here are go-aheads too. Splendid people! Intelligent, State-minded. So I won't start lecturing you," he smiled. "I'll just express the hope you won't rest on your laurels, and will give your native country more coal! I'm sorry, but I have to drop in on your neighbours just now. I'm afraid there'll be a different talk there!" He laughed, then cried out humorously: "I wish you fellows would start tackling them! Make them feel ashamed of themselves, in a neighbourly way, you know, the miner's way. Pull them along a bit."

"We don't mind!" Karnaukhov threw in with alacrity.

"That's it. Pull them along—you'll be doing a big job!" said Rudin waving his cap in farewell—he had been holding it all the time and practically never wore it—and making his way to the exit. The miners fell back to let him pass.

"But what about..." Andrei stammered, bewildered, and promptly checked himself.

"Finish the meeting!" the Old Man's voice boomed across the room. "See to your business and down to the pit!"

The miners began trickling out in crews. A motor-car horn hooted harshly outside, and one could hear the car starting off with a rattle of its old engine. Rudin had gone.

Svetlichny and Victor went up to Andrei, who was standing all alone in the middle of the hall.

Nechayenko, who had gone to see Rudin off, came back.

"Well! We've started the ball rolling!" he cried cheerfully. "Made your idea public, boys. Now we'll discuss it. And then—"

"Why didn't Comrade Rudin say anything?" Andrei faltered.

"You don't expect him to give his opinion right off. Such things are not decided slap-bang, old chap! It'll have to be discussed again and again. We'll bring Comrade Zhuravlyov into it. There . . ." said Nechayenko, rubbing his hands excitedly. "We may have to argue with someone, and perhaps even have a fight over it. Never mind! But don't you fellows throw up the sponge now," he warned.

"We won't!" Andrei said quietly. "Why, if need be, I'll . . . I'll write to Moscow!"

* 15 *

There was an occasion in the Steep Maria's history when the mine whistle was stolen. Yes, stolen. . . .

It happened as far back as in 1921. The Maria miners were restoring their ruined pit at the cost of tremendous efforts, and at last the day was fixed when it was to be started. But on the eve of the solemn event it was discovered that the shaft's whistle was missing. The mine was voiceless.

Theft was not even suspected at first. Who on earth could need a mine whistle? And why should anyone climb up the smoke-pipe to get it? It was decided that the wind had blown it off. There was nothing to do but fix up a new one.

In the evening, however, it became known that the whistle had actually been stolen. The Sofia urchins had stolen it through sheer mischief, and carried it off triumphantly to the Sofia, where they presented it to the

old colliers, as much as to say: See what sleepyheads they are at the Steep Maria; we stole their whistle from right under their noses!

The Steep Maria Colliery manager, upon hearing of it, stormed and raved. He demanded that the militia be called in at once, the offenders arrested, and the whistle restored to its owners. The technical supervisor shrugged his shoulders and said that would be making a mountain out of a mole-hill. They'd fix up a new whistle, that's all!

But the old miners shook their heads gravely and said:

"Oh, no! A new whistle may be better and cleaner, and sound nicer—we don't argue—but it won't be the same. We're used to ours. We could tell our old croaker in the morning from all the other whistles in the neighbourhood. A new whistle won't wake you, whereas the old one made you jump out of bed like a youngster."

"Is that what we dreamed of?" Uncle Onisim interpolated a comment of his own—he was a timberer then, and had no thought of becoming house-manager at the hostel. "When we were restoring the mine we thought: Now there'll come a time one fine morning when our bread-giver will start singing for all the world to hear, just like old times. And now what? A red-letter day like this, and the Steep Maria whistling in a strange voice! It's a shame! Why, people won't even know that it's the Steep Maria come to life again."

"That's just what I say," stormed the colliery manager. "We've got to call in the militia."

"No, that won't do either," the old men demurred. "Let us settle the matter our own way, the miner's way."

And they went about it their own way. That very evening the old men (some no older than forty, for the term "old man" is applied at the mine not to those who have lived long on earth but to those who have worked long under it) put on their best clothes fished out from the

bottoms of old chests, such as the suits they had worn at their weddings, stiff starched collars or delicately embroidered blouses worn over the trousers under the jacket. The ex-combatants turned out in neat khaki jackets—spoils of war—with red partisan bows over the left pocket; while old Mokeyich, the watchman, even pinned on his St. George's Cross, and flatly refused to take off that old-regime token which, as he explained, he had won with his own blood. The solemn procession sallied forth to the Sofia to pay their compliments to their neighbours and redeem the purloined whistle with several pails of home-brewed vodka.

Early the next morning the Steep Maria's old whistle resounded over the chilled steppe and floated over the mounds, mists and dewy roofs, wakening no one—for all were already up to hear it—and gladdening everyone. At the sound of the Maria's old familiar voice, people came running down to the shaft from all over the mining town, happy and proud. The crowd cheered long, lustily and hoarsely. Caps and mittens were thrown down the shaft.

And all this to the accompaniment of the Maria's unintermittent blasts, which resounded over the steppe.

The old folks crossed themselves, as at the sound of church bells. Not because they believed in God, but because they knew no other way of expressing their feelings. The colliers' wives raised their children aloft and whispered to them:

"Listen, sonny, listen! That's our Maria whistling. We'll have bread now!"

The boys got this story from the same unfailing source—old Uncle Onisim. Fyodor Svetlichny suddenly recollected it apropos of nothing at all, when next he went inbye after what had happened in the stint room. He smiled involuntarily at the recollection, a warm smile of deep emotion, the way he had smiled when he had first heard the story from Uncle Onisim. And again, apropos

of nothing at all, he thought: "I'm lucky to have come to the Steep Maria of all places and now of all times!"

The talk in the stint room would seem to have led nowhere. Men had made a bit of a noise, enjoyed a laugh and gone their ways. The idea of the record, so hastily and disjointedly set forth by Andrei amid the hubbub of the stint room, seemed doomed to die down like a half-burnt match thrown on the damp ground. But that was only on the face of it. Fyodor Svetlichny knew that better than anyone else.

That day, while doing duty for Prokop Maximovich, he had met numerous people, and all of them, some casually, others directly, touched on the subject that had been broached in the stint room. Never, in Svetlichny's memory, had there been such excitement at the Steep Maria. Seventy tons—that challenging figure thrown out by Andrei stood before everyone's eyes. No speech, however stirring, could have raised such a tumult of souls as that simple figure—70. A coal-hewer could give seventy tons a shift while now he gave only ten! These figures were in all men's minds as they struggled in the cramped workings which seemed more cramped than ever now; and each one figured out whether he could do it or not, some believing, others doubting, and still others laughing up their sleeves or even waxing angry, but all excited about it. Some saw fame coming to their mine from it, some dreamed of fame for themselves, while others began feverishly to reckon up how much a hewer could earn by it. Those who were good at figures tried to calculate how much coal the whole mine would give if Andrei's method turned out to be workable, and the result of these computations was so staggering that it made their heads reel. There were also men who regarded the whole noisy scheme with alarm and foreboding, thinking that one or two hewers would now suffice to handle the working face in place of ten. That meant having to quit the Steep Maria

where they had settled down and felt at home. They had a kitchen garden and cherry trees round the house. And the hoarse old whistle of the Steep Maria was sweeter music to them than the most melodious new whistles anywhere else. Where would they go, leaving all this, they and their families?

That day deputy Makivchuk crawled into Victor's working for the express purpose of having the matter out with him.

"You're such a live wire, Victor!" he said to the young hewer in a flattering tone, "you're just asking for trouble!"

"Never mind that," Victor growled. "You can't scare me."

"All the men are wild at you and Andrei—"

"All of 'em?"

"Yes. To a man! Folks are sore, you know. These two fellows, they say, think themselves a sight too smart. I'm warning you, Victor, because I like you. You can never be too sure, you know—you may get hurt. There are a lot of dark corners in the pit."

"Get along, stop croaking!"

"I'd advise you to lay off, really."

"What do you care?"

"Me? Oh, I don't care!" Makivchuk laughed, but his eyes had an ugly glint in them. "I'm telling you this for your own good."

"Get the hell out of here, you Petlura bastard!" Victor suddenly flared up, swinging his hammer over the man's head. "Mind you don't meet your death before I do."

"All right, keep your hair on . . ." Makivchuk muttered, crawling away. "I meant well. You'd better warn Andrei, just in case. . . ."

He did not dare go to Andrei's working and tell him that to his face.

Andrei at the moment had an unexpected visitor—a

coal-hewer by the name of Sukhobokov, whom he hardly knew. The man was a recent arrival at the mine, having come home from the army where he had been serving on re-engagement. He squatted down by a prop without a word of greeting and watched Andrei timbering in silence. After a while he asked:

"Can you spare a minute?"

Andrei laid his axe aside without uttering a word and looked questioningly at Sukhobokov. The latter crawled up closer. The light of the lamp dimly illumined his thin rugged face, sharp narrow shoulders and extremely long arms.

"No political lectures," Sukhobokov warned him. "I'm educated enough. Tell me in practical terms what it is you propose." And he waited expectantly for Andrei's reply.

Later on in the day Mitya Zakorko, who was working in the western drift, intercepted Svetlichny on the surface, by the change-house.

"Look here," he said. "I've been waiting specially to see you. I asked the care-taker, and she said you hadn't washed yet."

"Really?" Svetlichny answered with a chuckle. "What do you want me for?"

"Look here!" Zakorko repeated, clutching his arm eagerly. "You're in the know. I feel it. I'll bet my life you have a finger in it."

"Perhaps I have."

"Well, you just tell me this—is the thing really possible or is it just eyewash? That's all I want to know. I mean, is it technically possible?" Mitya whispered pleadingly. "I'm asking you as a friend."

"It's possible," Svetlichny answered briefly.

"Then you'll go ahead with it?"

"Yes."

"But why those two?" Zakorko cried jealously. "Why Andrei and Victor of all men?"

"Because it's their idea," Svetlichny answered, but Mitya interrupted him excitedly:

"Listen, Fyodor, I'm a local man, an old-timer. I've been working in this pit since I was a kid, and my Dad was killed here—his body hasn't been found yet. His bones are rotting somewhere down below. Why them, and not me? No, really, Fyodor, I'm asking you as an old friend. I've lost my peace of mind altogether."

Sergei Ocheretin, coming to his new neat house after work, felt that he, too, had lost his peace of mind. Nothing gladdened him now—neither Nastya's colourful carpet strips on the floor, nor the aspidistra in the tub, nor the fresh sprig of fragrant poplar over the mirror, nor the spotless cleanliness of the parlour, which was hardly ever used, but where Sergei loved to peep in with a feeling of pride when he came home from the dusty pit, and where he entertained guests, who were always full of praise for Nastya's tidiness and housekeeping talents, and for the husband's professional skill and good earnings. But the parlour gave him no pleasure now, he felt no sense of pride, and even his usual keen appetite was lacking, despite the tantalizing odours that issued from the kitchen, where Nastya was zealously cooking jam for the winter. She poked her head out at the sound of her husband's footsteps, cried "I shan't be a minute!" and vanished again. She passed Sergei a minute later triumphantly carrying an odorous steaming pan, then came back and started laying the table. This scene of prosperity in his own home, which seemed all the more striking and brimming after the austere years of food rationing, and had but yesterday filled him with a sense of contentment, tended rather to disturb him still more instead of gladdening his heart as it always did. It was as if the cause of his troubled mood that day lay precisely here, in these pans and tubs.

"Seventy tons—seventy tons!" he brooded, restlessly

pace the rooms, the yard and the little garden. "Can it really be done? And how does it happen that I'm not in it? Will they bring it off? That means Sergei Ocheretin, the leading shock-worker, will go off the honour board!"

"Come and have your dinner!" Nastya called, and he went in unwillingly and began eating in moody abstraction.

Looking at her husband's troubled face, Nastya maintained silence, not daring to ask what the matter was. She guessed that he was thinking about the mine, which meant that something had happened there.

Sergei did not regain his usual peace of mind after dinner. He prowled about the house for another hour or so, then snatched up his cap and rushed out.

"Where are you off to?" Nastya shouted after him jealously, but he waved the question aside with a gesture of annoyance and ran off to the hostel where the boys lived.

He found a large gathering there. The room was blue with smoke. And Sergei sat there the whole evening, listening to the disputes about the record. He joined the argument himself, and towards the end he cheered up a bit.

Before going, however, he called Svetlichny out into the corridor and pleaded with him in a whisper, saying that he, Sergei Ocheretin, should not be left out of this, as though the thing depended upon Svetlichny alone.

That evening the two Zakorluka brothers—Zakorluka Senior, the coal-hewer, and Zakorluka Junior, the timberer, met as usual at the family dinner. Zakorluka the elder, the one who had spoken irritably in the stint room about the mine's plan being too small, started questioning his younger brother whether he would agree to pair with him in the event of the management endorsing Voronko's proposal. That the thing was workable, Zakorluka, old experienced miner that he was, did not have the slightest doubt.

"We could easily manage it!" he said earnestly. "I'd hew the coal while you set the props. Eh? We could give even more than seventy tons. You just figure it out, eh?" They discussed the matter till late in the evening.

That night Andrei Voronko tossed long and restlessly in his bed. He knew the fight would be a fierce one, and he was ready for it. He knew there could be no retreat now, and he would not retreat. As for Nechayenko, he did not sleep at all that night. True to his habit of probing to the bottom of things he lugged home a pile of books, all he could find on coal mining at the colliery library—text-books, works of reference, monographs and lectures—and delved into them for an answer. Naturally, he found nothing, not a single word about the method proposed by Andrei Voronko, but neither did he find any objections to that method, and towards the morning he was fully persuaded that the record was possible. His spirits soared, and he decided that it would be a crime to put the thing off, that he would have to go immediately to the Town Party Committee. He realized that the stubborn Old Man was a nut he would not be able to crack by himself. He would have to find a strong, masterful man, one well up in the mining business, who would listen to him calmly, weigh the matter carefully and give his support!

Nechayenko hoped to find such a man in the Town Party Committee. Rudin was not there when he arrived—he had been called out to the Regional Party Committee—but then he met the Second Secretary of the T.P.C., Vasili Sergeyevich Zhuravlyov, to whom he made a detailed report.

* 16 *

A man's face in mature years seldom preserves the features of childhood: it changes beyond recognition, reappearing again only in his children. But there are

men who retain the likeness to their childhood photographs even after they have turned grey. Such men never succeed in growing fat or bald, or puffed up with self-importance. They keep thin no matter how you feed them, and stay shy, artless youngsters at heart no matter what rank you confer upon them. Such men are nearly always good men.

And such a man was Vasili Sergeyevich Zhuravlyov, the Second Secretary of the Town Party Committee.

I had known him for many years, and the last time I saw him was quite recently—in 1950. He had not changed or grown any older. His trustful eyes beamed with the same soft radiance, even when he was angry or taking anyone to task.

I have an old photograph, taken in 1922, of the Komsomol group of the Steep Maria Colliery. I like to look at it. I have noticed that the history of any one of my contemporaries at the mine could be traced back to a Komsomol youth. Each had been in the Komsomol.

I gaze at the photograph with pardonable tenderness, for I know all the boys pictured on it. They are sitting or lying on the grass, in their leather jackets, all shock-headed big-eyed devil-may-care youngsters—the first Komsomol miners, who went out intrepidly to fight the bandits in Roaring Ravine, to stand Special Detachment guard, to work at the first Subbotnik, and later launched on the desperate venture of scaling the walls of the Workers' Faculties and Institutes. They took even learning by assault.

I know the life story of every one of those boys. This one, in his father's shabby old jacket, has become an engineer, manager of a colliery; this one in the frayed windbreaker without a single button on it—an air force general; this one in the black Russian shirt, with his hair brushed back—a professor of political economy; this grey-eyed lad—a celebrated miner, and this one in the centre,

the leader, with turbulent black eyes and hands folded on his chest—First Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Ukrainian Republic.

Occasionally we meet; we have all changed considerably, almost beyond recognition. And only one of the group, a thin little mechanic with wondering eyes—Vasya Zhuravlyov—still looks like his photograph. Outwardly he hardly changes, as if he had the secret of eternal youth. In 1950 I found him almost the same as when I had last seen him in 1935.

True, now, in the year nineteen-fifty, on the insistence of his wife and friends, he wears a collar and tie and even a soft hat, but in those days, in the 'thirties, he always wore a pancake cap, a blue Russian shirt buttoned up to the throat with white buttons, and trousers worn inside his top-boots. But hat or cap, one could immediately place him as an old Komsomol worker. Not a propagandist, nor a political education worker, but a perpetual *Ecprav*,* that is, an indefatigable defender of the interests of the working-class youth, an advocate of the juvenile apprentices, an organizer of mining schools, a standing representative of the Komsomol in the Trade Union, an active member of the Youth Section in the Working Men's Club—a thorn in the side of the business executives, who although considering him a privileged nuisance and sometimes driving him out of their offices, nearly always acceded to his requests on behalf of the young workers, and, after their own fashion, loved and respected him. It was hard to refuse him anything.

Looking at his plain, slightly pock-marked, kind, open countenance, one felt immediately that other people's affairs and interests were far more important to him than his own, that there was little he wanted for himself. Had

* *Ecprav*—Abbreviation for "Chief of Economic and Legal Department of a Town or Regional Komsomol Committee."—*Tr.*

he been told: "Ask anything you want for yourself," he would have been at a loss. He never experienced want, because he had never known prosperity. He ate his meals in the colliers' dining-rooms and was contented. He sometimes spent the night in the colliers' hostels and slept like a top. Even when he settled down to married life he did not acquire the traditional requisites of the household such as a cow, an orchard or a kitchen garden. Not because he disapproved of these things—on the contrary, he even encouraged them in others—but simply because he had no time for them, and his wife, too, was a social worker, who afterwards became chairman of the Collier Wives' Council.

Zhuravlyov had mingled with people all his life. He loved them; they were all different to him, all interesting, and, above all, they needed him. It was a habit of his, first and foremost, to take an interest in the miner's earnings, in his living conditions and everyday needs, or, as he put it, "to poke his nose in the miner's borshch." He was no adept at speech-making, but there were few who could hold a talk with the men in the hostel or at stint assignment better than he could. Zhuravlyov loved trade union work and was considered a good Trade Union Colliery Committee chairman.

When he went over to Party work Zhuravlyov realized that he had a good deal to learn. He lacked theoretical knowledge. On the other hand, the people he was to work with were familiar to him since childhood—mining folk whom he knew inside out. And in Party work the most important thing was the human element.

At the Town Party Committee, as on every other job where the Party placed him, Zhuravlyov threw himself into his work whole-heartedly. He was fond of saying that the Second Secretary of the Town Party Committee was "a work pony pulling a load of firewood," and he

pulled his load conscientiously, and lovingly and made no fuss about it.

Nechayenko knew this. He knew Zhuravlyov would not wave him off or refer him to some rank-and-file staff worker for the "preliminaries," but would immediately go into the matter himself, and get the hang of it, like an experienced miner. But would he make a decision? To the impulsive Nechayenko the Second Secretary appeared a bit too cautious, slow-moving and painstaking, incapable of letting himself be carried away by an idea on the spur of the moment. And here was a case where instant enthusiasm was called for! Although Nechayenko had told the boys the evening before that one should not act rashly in a matter like this, today, after a night spent in agonizing reflection and doubts, he reasoned otherwise. He considered that there was nothing more to think about, the matter was plain, and what was needed was action, immediate and urgent action.

In this frame of mind he entered Zhuravlyov's private office with the intention of "sweeping the Secretary off his feet."

"There's been a big event at stint assignment yesterday," he began excitedly after a perfunctory greeting.

"Yes, what is it?" Zhuravlyov asked calmly.

"Our people are kicking against the old methods of coal working, against the short benches."

"Are they?"

"They demand that the work at the face should be organized differently," cried Nechayenko with growing excitement and annoyance at Zhuravlyov's coolness. "If you only heard what they're talking about, Vasili Sergeyevich!"

"All of them?" Zhuravlyov said quizzically.

Nechayenko pulled up short.

"Why," he asked in astonishment, "have you already heard about it?"

"It's twenty-four hours old, my dear chap," the Secretary laughed good-naturedly.

"Did Comrade Rudin tell you?"

"No, Semyon Petrovich told me nothing. I saw him only for a minute. You know, we live on coal and breathe off coal, and the world is full of rumours, as they say."

"And what do you think about it?" Nechayenko asked in a drooping voice.

"I don't think anything yet. I was just going down to see you."

"Then let's go along!" Nechayenko cried, jumping up.

"I'll drop in this evening. Meantime, sit down and tell me what it's all about. I only got it from hearsay, you know. Will you have some tea?"

Nechayenko resumed his seat impatiently, declined the tea, and gave a clear, intelligible account of the proposed idea, answering all Zhuravlyov's questions with the knowledge of a true miner.

"Well?" he asked with hope, when the Secretary's questions were exhausted. "What are you going to do about it, Vasili Sergeevich?"

Zhuravlyov took his time, and then answered, almost reluctantly:

"Do about it? I'll have to see your boys now. I'll drop in this evening."

He kept his word, and arrived that evening at the office of the Colliery Party Committee.

"I say, Nikolai Ostapovich, what's the name of that boy who spoke in the stint room?" he asked.

"Andrei Voronko."

"Ah, yes!" Zhuravlyov had a poor memory for names, but a good one for faces. "Andrei Voronko, you say. Well, let's go and look him up. Do you know where he lives?"

"Of course! I warned them. They're expecting you."

"Then lead the way!"

They both set out for the hostel.

The boys were waiting. The room had been tidied up, through the joint efforts of Vera and Uncle Onisim. It smelt of wormwood, Uncle Onisim's favourite remedy against bugs. Crimson carnations, brought by Vera, stood in a glazed earthenware vase on the window-sill. "Oho!" Svetlichny had remarked. "The language of flowers. Red for love." But he was nervous, too, while waiting for Zhuravlyov. They had bought some new books, and Victor set them out conspicuously on the bookstand. He stepped back and contemplated the effect with a pleased air. Victor, like all the others, believed that all these arrangements—the books, the carnations on the window, the agreeable smell of wormwood, the clean pillow-cases and the damask tablecloth—were of momentous importance and likely to affect the issue at stake.

At last Zhuravlyov and Nechayenko arrived.

The introductions over, all sat down at the table. The hosts maintained an awkward silence. Nechayenko was silent, too.

"Well, boys," said Zhuravlyov, "let's get down to business. You won't mind my asking you a blunt question?"

"Oh, no," Andrei answered for all.

"Are you proposing this idea of yours seriously or is it just froth?"

"Why, we can't get a wink of sleep for this damned idea!" Victor cried passionately. "Why, we. . . . Oh, hell!" He waved his hand with a hopeless gesture.

Zhuravlyov laughed. The ardour pleased him well. Now he had to test the boys' firmness.

"So you mean business, no backing out, eh?" he asked slyly.

"We'll fight it out," Andrei said with a shrug.

"Good!" Zhuravlyov grunted. "In that case, let's have all the details once more."

Andrei exchanged glances with his pals, cleared his throat and began to set forth his idea in a rambling, con-

fused fashion, while Zhuravlyov sat listening with slight nods.

"So you think the working face must be straightened out?" he asked.

"Of course."

"That'll take time." He paused reflectively. "And what about trying it as it is, with the benches, but dividing the work? Is it possible?" he asked uncertainly.

"It is," said Svetlichny. "But it won't be so effective."

"How much coal could you get at a shift in such a case?"

Andrei considered it.

"About sixty or seventy tons, I think," he said cautiously.

"All of a hundred!" cried Victor.

"At present you're giving ten, aren't you?" Zhuravlyov asked.

"Sometimes twelve," answered Andrei. "Victor gives fourteen."

"I see!" Zhuravlyov chuckled. "Fourteen and ... a hundred!"

"So you support us, then?" Andrei cried eagerly.

"I didn't say so yet," Zhuravlyov said with a twinkle. "I say this—the thing's got to be tried out, boys. And tried out on the quiet. If it works it'll speak for itself."

"We agree to that," Andrei said after a moment's reflection.

"I should even suggest we try it in the night," Zhuravlyov added. "During the repair shift. Eh, Nikolai Ostapovich?"—with a look at Nechayenko.

The latter grinned.

"So's the Old Man shouldn't know?"

"No, I'll tackle the Old Man. He's the boss of the pit, you know. You can't very well take liberties in a man's house, even at night."

"The Old Man won't agree!" Andrei said despairingly. "We've asked him already."

"And now we'll ask him—Nikolai Ostapovich and I," laughed Zhuravlyov. "Well, boys, that's that then—in the night, during the repair shift. You'll cut on your own section, of course?"

"Naturally!"

"Who's your overman?"

"Lesnyak, Prokop Maximovich. He supports the idea whole-heartedly."

"Ah! That's good!" Zhuravlyov beamed. "He'll prepare the working face then—"

"Two working faces!" cried Victor. "There's two of us, Andrei and me."

"Oh, no!" Zhuravlyov shook his head. "You've got to start with one. No, no, that won't do, boys," he waved his hands in protest. "You'll ruin the whole thing. Besides, the Old Man will never give you two working faces."

"That's true," Svetlichny muttered.

Victor looked round wildly and hung his head.

"Oh, all right!" he barely managed to get out, and there was a catch in his voice. "You go ahead then, Andrei." He turned sharply on his heel and went over to the window.

An awkward silence ensued. "Tut, tut, that's too bad!" Zhuravlyov thought worriedly. "What a pity. They're both keen on it and both have an equal right. Young fellows, eager to test their mettle. It's a sore point with both of 'em. What a shame!" But he tactfully held his peace, considering that it was a matter for the boys to decide between themselves.

Nechayenko, too, was silent. He glanced curiously from Andrei's pale face to Victor, or, rather, his back. Even his back looked pained—with hunched-up shoulders and indrawn head.

Andrei was silent, too. He looked down on the floor,

thinking of Dasha. Ah, if only Dasha were here! She would settle the question. If only she understood him aright and did not take offence, did not stop loving him.

At last he looked up and said slowly:

"Let Victor go ahead—"

"No, drop that!" Victor cried irritably, spinning round. "I won't have it."

"Victor will go!" Andrei repeated. "He's a quicker worker. He'll cut more. Every ton counts!" he concluded with a wan smile.

Zhuravlyov gave him a close scrutiny but said nothing. He got up to take his leave.

"So we fix it for the night of September first? Are we agreed?"

"We're ready."

"Very well. I'll be seeing you again," Zhuravlyov said, and he went out, accompanied by Nechayenko.

It was already dark outside. The chauffeur was asleep in the car outside the Colliery Party Committee office.

"What did you say the name of that fair-headed lad was?" Zhuravlyov asked, getting into the car.

"Andrei Voronko," Nechayenko answered, smiling.

"Yes, of course. . . Voronko," the Secretary repeated thoughtfully. "I won't forget it now!"

* 17 *

It was definitely decided to make the trial on the night of September first. In two days' time.

On the evening of the thirtieth the whole "operational staff," as Svetlichny expressed it, foregathered at Uncle Prokop's. It included Andrei, Victor, Svetlichny, Prokop Maximovich and Dasha. Nechayenko had not turned up yet.

Andrei had already told Dasha that it was Victor who was going to attempt the record.

"Why not you?" she asked in surprise.

"Victor's the more reliable. . . ."

Dasha had looked at him and shrugged her shoulders. He thought with dismay: what does she think of me? Does she understand?

But he did not regret what he had done.

That other evening, as soon as Zhuravlyov and Nechayenko had gone, Victor had rushed up to him and seized his hands.

"Friend! Dear, dear friend!" he had whispered fervidly. "I'll never forget this . . . d'you hear? As long as I live, I'll hew coal for the two of us. We'll share the fame!"

Andrei had merely smiled in reply. What was fame? Friendship was dearer.

That night the boys hardly slept. They went over the details of the next day's "battle" again and again, and suddenly reminded themselves that they had forgotten to make arrangements with Nechayenko for the timber to be laid out in advance at the benches. Then their thoughts ran back to the old days, the "prehistoric era" when they had still been "cave men" instead of miners, had not been able to handle their tools properly or cope with their quota, had let the whole crew down and stood in fear of Svetlichny.

"Gosh! Weren't we scared stiff of the Komsomol organizer!" Victor confessed. "We dreaded Svetlichny more than we did the colliery manager."

"Oh, shut up!" growled Svetlichny. "Go to sleep and don't be fools."

However, Victor kept at it all night. He was agog with excitement. In that state he went to the mine the next morning. At stint assignment, in the cage, and afterwards at the working face, he was boisterously gay,

excited and voluble, so much so that Svetlichny feared he would expend all his nervous energy long before the record attempt, and would have no go left in him at the critical hour. But Victor was inexhaustible. He seemed to be supercharged with electricity, sufficient to drive all the hauling engines in the pit. He was the embodiment of health and vitality, fully conscious of this power and confident that it would not fail him. He was bubbling over, drunk with joy, like a man who had stepped at last on the threshold of his dream's fulfilment. Dasha was lost in admiration of him. Looking at him, she could not help smiling.

At last Nechayenko arrived. He did not come alone, but with the Old Man. The "staff" was thunder-struck. Its members even forgot to get up at the manager's entrance.

The Old Man walked in coolly, greeted the company at large with a perfunctory "Good evening" and Svetlichny with a wry hostile glance—he could not forgive him the "Khvostism."

Prokop Maximovich betook himself hastily to the kitchen.

"The Old Man's come—black as thunder," he whispered anxiously to Nastasya Makarovna. "Boil some boolbas for him! Perhaps they'll put him in a better humour."

When the excitement was over and all had settled into their places Nechayenko said cheerfully:

"Well, boys, you haven't changed your minds, not backing out, are you?"

"Nikolai Ostapovich!" Victor cried, jumping up. "This is the limit, really! Why, if I was left out of this business now, I'd throw myself down the shaft head first—honest to God I would!"

Everyone laughed. He was magnificent at that moment—a fine young specimen of a miner. Even the Old

Man could not suppress a smile. He had a weak spot for the rollicking ways of his "family."

"Well, if that's the case..." began Nechayenko, and the "staff" put their heads together.

It was decided that Victor would hew the coal at his own working face. The chief engineer would see to the air pressure and the Old Man would check it. Pit props were to be laid out in advance along the working face. Timberers Zakorluka Junior and Borovoy, both Communists, were to follow in Victor's tracks. Nechayenko had already spoken to them.

"Good fellows," Victor agreed. "Know their job."

"Now about haulage..." said Svetlichny.

"We'll have the tubs ready. The horse-putters will be warned to come out for the night shift."

"If you don't mind," Svetlichny said with a cautious glance at the Old Man, "I'll look after the haulage end of the job."

The Old Man said nothing.

"Good!" Nechayenko said. "Anything else?"

"I'll overhaul the air hammer first thing in the morning, but it mustn't be given to anybody else," Victor said. "I'll check up myself."

"We'll look after your hammer," Nechayenko said laughingly. "As for you, you'll take a nap in the daytime, old bean."

"Not on your life!" cried Victor. "I shan't shut an eye until I've hacked a hundred tons."

"You'll go to sleep, my dear chap. By way of Party discipline," said Nechayenko. "You'd better keep an eye on him, Comrade Andrei."

Nastasya Makarovna brought steaming boolbas, snacks and vodka to the table.

"Well, here's to the success of our undertaking!" proposed Prokop Maximovich, raising his glass.

They all clinked glasses and drained them.

The Old Man suddenly said:

"It goes sore against my grain. My soul revolts against it." He shook his head and sighed. "I'm getting old I suppose. Time I retired to the easy chair. But I don't want to stand in the way of young ideas." He waved his hand with a hopeless gesture and picked his glass up.

The remark was allowed to pass in tactful silence. Nechayenko said:

"Vasili Sergeyeovich phoned. He'll be coming down tomorrow night."

"That's fine," Uncle Prokop threw in animatedly.

And they all started talking again about the record.

The Old Man, meanwhile, sat eating boolbas in gloomy silence, thinking that he had indeed grown old, and that everything had grown old with him, everything he had loved and appreciated and cherished in life. Even boolbas were not the same, they had lost their flavour and relish. The world around him was changing, growing younger.

And suddenly he recalled the year 1919. The first Communist Subbotniks. And how his own soul had burned at white heat, setting fire to those around him, how he had worked without pay far better and more willingly than for money, loading coal to be shipped to Moscow, to Lenin. . . .

Then why could he not understand Andrei and Victor now? Were they not his children? Perhaps in their souls, too, had been kindled that great love, that spark of superb endeavour for the weal of their native land which had become a common feature of all working men since the power in the land had passed into their hands. And suddenly he thought with envy: "Prokop isn't much younger than I am, yet he is with them."

People around him were gay and noisy. Glasses clinked merrily. The company drank and sang songs in chorus. They were enjoying themselves with the bois-

terous zest of miners at a wedding party. Yet it was no wedding party, nor a celebration on New Year's eve. People were celebrating the eve of a labour record. The dream was coming true! Labour was becoming a holiday.

And he who was to accomplish the feat of labour the next day enjoyed himself most of all. He sang loudest. He drank most, without getting drunk. Finally, he came out into the middle of the room, did the first "invitation" steps of a dance and cried:

"Come on, Dasha! The miner's dance!" And without waiting for her to join him, Victor started performing a jig.

Victor woke up the next morning before the others and roused them all. He was burning with impatience. He was haunted by a fear that something unforeseen would happen and the attempt would be called off. He ran off to the mine straightaway without having breakfast. Taking his air hammer from the workshop, he took it to pieces, washed every part in kerosene and oiled it thoroughly.

The workshop men gathered around him and started chaffing him good-naturedly.

"Anyone would think the hammer was your sweetheart, the way you pet it."

They had no inkling of what was afoot. It had been kept secret in deference to the wishes of the cautious Zhuravlyov.

"Acting funny again, Victor," Kvashnin, the pock-marked "god" of the machine shop, said in a pained tone. "D'you think we understand less about machinery than you do?"

"Never mind!" said Victor with a shrug. "We all know you piece workers."

He reassembled the hammer and tested it under pres-

sure The tool worked smoothly. Victor wiped it with a rag and gave it back to the shift mechanic.

"Mind you don't give it to anyone else," he warned the man sternly. "If you do—"

Then he and Andrei ran off to the stint room, where they met the timberers Zakorluka Junior and Borovoy, and made all the necessary arrangements with them.

There was nothing more for them to do at the mine.

"Let's go and have something to eat," Andrei proposed.

Victor submitted with a sigh. All they had to do was to wait patiently for the night.

After breakfast Andrei said:

"And now to bed, Victor!"

"To bed?" Victor cried out in anguish. "Oh, Andrei, have a heart, how can I go to bed now!"

"To bed, to bed!" Andrei said, laughing. "It's Party discipline."

It was a distressed but submissive Victor whom he piloted home and saw to bed, covering him up solicitously with a light blanket.

"Now go to sleep! I'll take a nap too."

To his astonishment, Victor fell asleep at once. These last two days had told on him. Andrei could not fall asleep. He, too, had been under a great emotional strain these last few days, only it had not found such noisy outlet as in his friend. On the contrary, during emotional stress Andrei grew still quieter, more braced and self-suppressed than usual. He, too, was worried lest the Old Man changed his mind or something unexpected happened. Only one thing he did not doubt for a minute—that Victor would win the day. "Victor will pull it off. He won't let us down!" he thought tenderly. "It's right that he's doing it, not me. He's a dynamo. He's got more go."

He couldn't lie still. Getting up, he softly drew a chair up to his friend's bedside and sat down next to him.

"Sleep will do him good!" he thought. "He must save his strength. Will he give a hundred tons, I wonder? A hundred would be fine. It will create a sensation. And then I'll go the same method. I'm not so sure about a hundred, but I can manage eighty or ninety. And then the ball will start rolling---Sergei Ocheretin, and Mitya Zakorko, and Sukhobokov.... Perhaps folks at other mines will get interested. We'll give more coal. And we'll be better off!" He suddenly thought of Dasha. Ah, Dasha. He sighed. She was leaving soon. Going away to Moscow in three days' time. But there was no help for it. She was studying. Good thing, too. And he was staying behind. Yes. That's how it was. They had not had a chance of talking things over properly. Had not even declared their love. It was his fault. Got the wind up. Never mind, there was time for all that afterwards, after the record. Things would straighten themselves out. Everything would come right.

Wrapt in thought, he did not notice that dusk had crept into the window. All he became aware of was that Victor's face had suddenly darkened.

"I wonder what time it is?" Andrei came to himself with a start. He glanced at the clock. "Let him sleep on a bit. It's early." And he lapsed into meditation again. This time he could not have said himself what he was thinking about---so fleeting, hazy and fragmentary were his thoughts. A knock on the door suddenly brought him out of his reveries. Dasha burst into the room, crying straight from the threshold:

"Mamma said---"

"Sh! Don't shout!" Andrei waved his arms at her, then pointed to the sleeping Victor.

Dasha pulled up sharp and her hand flew to her mouth. Then carefully, on tiptoe, she went up to Andrei and whispered:

"Mamma said Victor was not to go to the dining-room. She has prepared everything for him herself."

"All right," Andrei answered in a whisper. "I want him to get a little more sleep. Just a little more. Sit down."

Trying not to make a noise with the stool, Dasha sat down by the bedside and studied Victor's face.

He was sleeping like a child and apparently dreaming very happy dreams, for he was smiling. Dasha recalled how she had stood over him several days ago, but he had been tipsy then, helpless and pitiable, whereas now he was strong, he was powerful. Soon he would go out to set the record, smash down the coal face all by himself, and tomorrow the whole colliery would hear of his fame. And here he lay smiling in his sleep, looking so sweet and funny.

Suddenly she became aware that there was not a man in the world dearer to her at that moment than this boy, that she loved him, yes, loved him. A hot wave of joy and pain, such as she had never experienced before, swept over her. She guessed then that this was love, the love that people wrote about in books and sang of in songs.

She was stunned by this unexpected discovery. But it couldn't be! She tried to drive the thought from her. It was like thunder out of a clear sky. It was simply that Victor was in everyone's mind these days, everyone loved him, and praised him, and took care of him—her father, Svetlichny, Nechayenko and Andrei, who even now was guarding his sleep. She had just yielded to the general mood, taken admiration and friendship for love. It was nothing, it was sure to pass.

Her heart, however, told her a different story. It throbbed with such a wild tumult of joy that Dasha no longer had any control over it. Oblivious to all else in the world, she gazed at the beloved face—the face of that

impudent, annoying, mocking boy. And it was him, of all men, she had to fall in love with! Her eyes shone with such frank and exultant love and tenderness as she gazed at Victor that Andrei, intercepting her look, understood everything.

* 18 *

Victor slept on, serenely unconscious of the passions that raged around him.

A fly alighted on his moist lip, and Andrei mechanically drove it off. It buzzed angrily round his head.

"So that's that. The end!" Andrei repeated mechanically to himself the first words that entered his mind. He repeated them, hardly gathering their import. Strange, but he felt no pain whatever. The sudden shock seemed to have deadened his senses. "That's that! The end!" he said to himself over and over again.

Dasha looked up at him timidly. Andrei appeared amazingly calm, although the colour had drained from his face. Dasha realized that Andrei had guessed.

She did not know what to do, what to say. But he did not ask her any questions. He sat as though frozen in his chair. Dasha felt that she could not stay a minute longer. "My God, what a muddle!" she thought, stealing a glance at Victor. His face looked quite dark in the dusk, but he was still smiling in his sleep. He could not suspect that she loved him, and he would never know it. She caught herself gazing at him fondly again. Andrei would notice it and it would hurt him. She jumped up and slipped out of the room. Andrei had not stirred.

Not until she was out in the street did Dasha feel free and completely happy. "So I love him, love him, love him!" she thought, all but running across the common. "I feel so wonderful, but . . . ashamed. Still, he will never know it. No one will ever know it. Never! But when did

it happen, when did I fall in love with him—now or before? And why did I fall in love with him, of all men? Still, he's a fine lad. And handsome. I thought him stupid at first. I didn't like him the least little bit. I hated him, even. I thought I was in love with Andrei. Good heavens, what a wicked woman I am!" she suddenly thought in horror. "Can it be that I love them both? But Andrei I love in quite a different way. I love him as a brother. And I respect him. But Victor ... how about Victor?"

She was dismayed. She had never loved before. For the first time her heart had opened out to a great thrilling love, and she immediately became transformed from a light-hearted, self-confident colliery girl into a timid lovesick lass.

But could a young girl explain why she fell in love with this man and not the other, or why she fell in love at all?

At any rate, she was in love, and she realized it, and was both happy and fearful of that love, and her heart leapt with happiness and an excitement akin to fear. The thought of Andrei disturbed this new feeling. "What about Andrei now? He loves me, he believed I..." but she immediately reassured herself: "That's all right, he's strong. He'll get over it quickly. I'm going away in three days anyway."

Poor Andrei! He would always, all his life, be considered a strong man, and would therefore be spared no pain!

"That's that! The end! Better not think about it!" he said to himself, sitting motionless by his friend's bedside. "It can't be helped. What's done can't be undone. And nobody's to blame. Neither Victor nor Dasha. Simply I'm not made for happiness."

If, at that moment, someone had shaken him out of his stupor and said: "Don't give in! Fight for your hap-

piness!"—he would have merely said with a bitter smile: "What for? Is this a thing you can fight for? And with whom would you have me fight? With Victor? But I know myself that he's the better man. I love him myself. And I love Dasha, and wish her joy. No! No one's to blame here. You can't mend anything. It's past cure. Besides, I wouldn't have stolen happiness if you gave it to me!"

He suddenly reminded himself that it was time to wake Victor. Good God! Because of this wretched love business, he had almost forgotten the main thing.

"Get up, Victor!" He gently shook his friend by the shoulder. "Get up, it's time!"

Victor was wide awake in a moment.

"What? Have I overslept?"

"No, but it's time," Andrei answered, switching on the light.

"Gosh, what a sleep!" Victor said stretching his limbs luxuriously. Then his glance fell upon his pal, and he cried:

"Andrei! What's the matter?"

"Why?"

"Look at yourself! What's happened?"

"Nothing," Andrei answered reluctantly. "You'd better dress. Oh, by the way. . ." he added, as though recollecting something, "Dasha popped in to say they are waiting for you with dinner."

"Ah!" Victor smiled. "Good idea."

They dressed and went to Uncle Prokop's.

"Here they are at last!" Uncle Prokop cried impatiently. "Sit down! Sit down! Borshch doesn't like to be kept waiting. There's a special borshch today. Borshch with buckwheat—the missus 'built' it."

"Great!" Victor said with a smile, sitting down to the table. A miner seldom bothers with roasted meat, cutlets and suchlike delicacies popular among town dwellers,

which he considers mere titbits, and prefers the more solid collier's borshch which is really "built up" on a solid basis of tomatoes, vegetables, cabbage, a goodly kilogram of meat per man, cayenne and other spices, and the whole seasoned with sour cream.

"Now, this is borshch!" Victor said, attacking the food with relish. "After a borshch like this a man can hew two hundred tons."

"I'm glad you like it, help yourself," murmured the hostess.

Andrei ate little. The food stuck in his throat. He sat bent over his plate, avoiding Victor's eyes. Dasha he did not see at all. She wasn't at the table, but from a corner she furtively studied Victor. She liked the way he ate—noisily and with relish. But then she liked everything in him now.

During the meal Nechayenko arrived. Noticing at once that he was excited, they all sat up in alarm.

"What's the matter?" Victor cried, turning pale. He thought the record had been called off.

"Plenty!" answered the Party organizer. "Vasili Sergeyevich has just phoned and given me the news that coal-hewer Alexei Stakhanov at the Central Irmino Mine has cut a hundred and two tons in a single shift.

"What!" gasped Victor.

"Stakhanov? Who's he?" Prokop Maximovich muttered in dismay. "Never heard of him."

"He applied the same method—division of labour," Nechayenko continued. "He hewed the coal while the timberers did the propping."

"So they've stolen a march on us!" Victor said with a twisted smile. He pushed the remains of the borshch away from him, spilling some on the tablecloth, and got up. "So that's that!" he said hoarsely. "Let's go home!"

"What do you mean?" Nechayenko said.

"Let's go home! Penny-a-dozen heroes!" Victor blurted out in a suppressed voice, making for the door.

"Hi, wait a minute, you young idiot!" Uncle Prokop checked him. "Sit down!" He turned to the Party organizer. "Nikolai Ostapovich, how many tons did you say this Alexei Stakhanov hewed?"

"A hundred and two. A world record."

"Victor will do more!" the old man shouted. "He'll beat Stakhanov! And he'll prove that this Stakhanov isn't the only coal-hewer in the world!"

"You can give a hundred and fifteen tons if you try hard," Andrei said excitedly.

All now looked at Victor. He gradually calmed down under the warming trust in his friends' eyes, and felt a resurgence of his old powers and confidence in himself.

"All right!" he said at last with a toss of his head. "We'll beat it! Come along!"

"That's the stuff, pal!" Nechayenko cried, overjoyed. "You needn't beat Stakhanov's record, just equal it, prove that it isn't just a fluke—that'll be a great thing in itself!" His eyes shone; he seemed to see farther than anyone else. "Come along, boys!"

"No, wait a minute!" Uncle Prokop checked them with a stern command. "We've got to sit down before such a 'journey'."*

They all complied in silence. Andrei even shut his eyes.

At that never-to-be-repeated moment strange visions, the most daring dreams and hopes, like a glimpse into the future, flashed before the inward eye of Andrei and all the others who sat in that quiet room.

"Well, Victor!" Uncle Prokop said rising. "May your arm today be strong, your pick sharp, and the coal soft. And now let's go!"

* There is an old Russian custom of sitting down a minute or two in silence before seeing anyone off on a journey.—*Tr.*

There is a soft magic in the balmy nights of the Donbas coal region at the beginning of September. A young moon hangs over the pit head, the sky may be starless, but stars move along the earth where the miners walk with their lamps.

The world lies bathed in the soft greenish radiance of the moon. It is not true that moonlight is cold and lifeless! He who has roamed a mining settlement at night and seen the smiling white cottages of the colliers beautified by its glow; he who has seen the steppe in the moonlight, silvery and alive with the murmuring ebb and flow of the feathergrass tide; he who has drunk in the hot rich odours of the night and listened to the sounds of the accordion—without which there are no summer evenings at the mine!—in short, he who has loved, and suffered, and hoped, knows how warm the moonlight is.

On such nights it is good to love and good to weave dreams. On such nights one breathes easier and believes more readily. On such nights marriages are sealed, first verses are written and vows are made.

On such a night Victor Abrosimov went out to achieve his record.

Virtually no one in the mining town knew about it. The repair shift—crib-builders, waste row prop setters, mechanics and timber-pushers—went quietly about their business in the drifts and galleries, never for a moment suspecting what was afoot right nearby, in the Third East level.

All who were in the secret had already assembled there. Even Pyotr Fomich, the chief engineer, had come and was glancing fearfully around him.

"Where have you been all day?" Andrei asked Svetlichny in a whisper.

"Here!" the latter answered briefly. Then in a rapid whisper: "I don't trust anyone! I checked everything with my own hands—the timber, the tubs, the air duct. And I'm still nervous about them."

"Well!" Nechayenko said quietly. "Good luck!" He tried to conceal his emotion beneath a light tone and succeeded but poorly. "Here, let me kiss you, Victor!" he suddenly said. He hugged the coal-hewer and whispered into his ear: "I believe in you! Remember, when you're hewing the coal, that we all believe in you!"

"I shan't let you down!" Victor answered quietly.

The timberers had already crawled into the working. Victor, Andrei and Dasha followed them. Dasha had all but gone down on her knees to her father and Nechayenko for permission to go to the pit.

"Watch the roof, mind it carefully!" Pyotr Fomich shouted after them. "Listen to it while you're cutting the coal."

"What are you afraid of?" Nechayenko said to him with annoyance. He couldn't stand cowards. "You needn't worry. We're not innovators any more."

"What do you mean?"

"What I say! This experiment was successfully put through yesterday at the Central Irm'no."

"What?" muttered the chief engineer. "So we've been forestalled? That's . . . that's a pity," he ended up with genuine disappointment in his voice.

Nechayenko glanced at him in surprise.

"Look here," he said. "I can't make you out! Aren't you glad?"

"I don't know myself," Pyotr Fomich shrugged despondently. How could he explain to Nechayenko that two souls struggled within him—that of the terrified official and of the innovator-engineer—and he did not know what to make of it himself.

Victor was already at the working face, making himself at home there. Dasha stole a glance at him. He seemed quite calm, and his movements were slow and deliberate. He hung his lamp on a fitch, then on second thoughts moved it closer to the face. Then he took off his jacket, under which he wore a sports shirt. The shirt was a new one, sky-blue, and he had apparently put it on for the first time. That was the only festive touch about that night, everything else being as usual. Dasha felt disappointed and even hurt. It seemed to her that none of these people in the pit—Andrei, the timberers and even Victor himself—realized or felt what a big thing was happening here in the Third East level. Dasha did not know yet that all big things started that way—simply and matter-of-factly.

Andrei crawled through to inspect the roof. One could hear him tapping the rock in the dark with the hook of his lamp. The sound was good and reassuring. Presently he reappeared.

"It's all right. The roof's secure!" he said quietly, and, leaning against a prop, he watched Victor in silence.

Victor had already checked the air delivery, and was now testing the flexible hose. He bent a section of it and put his ear to it. No, there was no hiss anywhere, no leakage. Everything was in order. He could start now. For a second he paused, drew his breath. Before him stood a solid wall of coal, a black petrified forest to be felled.

It was quiet all round. Seldom before had such a stillness reigned in the Third East. Not a sound came up from below. That night the whole working, all its eight benches, was Victor's. He was the sole master, the sole workman. That night he had to do the work of eight men.

Victor kneeled before the coal-face and switched on the pressure. The familiar joyous tremor ran through his arms and thence to his whole body. "That's better!" he

thought with satisfaction. "It makes all the difference when the air goes into one hammer instead of eight!" Whether it was because the air pressure was good and strong, or because his dream had come true and the whole working face now lay submissively in his power, or because that primeval wall of black unhewn forest lay so thrillingly near, luring him on, Victor suddenly felt his muscles swelling with such a surge of unspent strength, and his heart kindling with such valour, that he believed himself capable of working wonders that night and achieving anything he wanted. He seemed to have eight pairs of arms, eight hearts instead of one. The skill and experience of eight coal-hewers seemed to have entered into him in some mysterious way. And he realized that night that a joy was given him which rarely falls to the lot of man—that of living eight lives in one. Thrilled by the thought, he woke the sleeping echoes of the pit with an exultant shout:

"Well, Alexei Stakhanov, look out, old chap!"

And he attacked the coal-face, holding his hammer like a bayonnetted rifle.

A cloud of coal-dust flew over his head and struck the low roof. The coal poured down. The silence was broken. The whole working, from the upper level to the lower haulage tunnel, was filled with the din of the pneumatic hammer, which rose gradually from a nervous staccato to a long steady song of power like a roaring plane engine on a long-distance record flight. The change of sound meant that Victor had got into his stride, his usual work mood. It was not placidity or indifference—there is no repose where the flame of valour burns high—it was calculated restraint, the wise unruffled calm of the master-hand thoroughly skilled in the technique of his job, whether it be the handling of his machine, his horse, tool, or weapon, and fully alive to the power which he wielded over them. Idle thoughts disappeared, and even the thought of the record retreated somewhere into the back-

ground. Victor's movements grew economical and calculated, every minute packed full, and each of the hammer's thousand strokes perfectly timed and aimed.

Holding on to the prop with his left hand, Victor first undercut the seam, then made a notch along the top and brought the coal down. He first stripped the top layer of coal, then went back and cut down the bottom layer. All the time he kept a keen eye on his hammer and the pick, oiling the former and changing the latter, while he brought the coal down in a stream, advancing foot by foot towards his goal. Chkalov must have felt the same during his famous flight, dismissing from his mind all thoughts of world records, and concentrating instead on his instruments and on the job of flying, just as Victor concentrated on the job of coal-getting. And just as Chkalov probably felt that his plane's wings were his own wings, so Victor felt that his pneumatic hammer was an extension of his own strong arm.

Victor grew hot. He took off his shirt, which was now black instead of blue, wiped his perspiring face with it, then flung it aside and fell to hewing again. Dasha crouched somewhere behind him, but he was entirely unaware of her presence. She watched with admiration, as one watches the flight of an aeroplane from the ground. And she saw nothing but the beauty of that flight.

Victor was really beautiful at that moment. Every movement of his body with its rippling muscles, was both beautiful and intelligent. The whole of his swarthy, vibrant body, shining with sweat, was magnificent to behold, as is every human body in the act of work. Victor just then was like a fencer, as, with lower lip caught between his teeth, he made lunge after lunge, delivering well-aimed thrusts at the breast of the coal-face, or like a machine-gunner firing round upon round into his target. But perhaps most of all, he resembled a dancer whose half-naked swarthy body quivered in a wild but rhythmic

dance in time to the music of the pneumatic hammer. Attacking his work with a gay swinging rhythm, his breath coming smooth, without wheezes and grunts, Victor did not seem to be working at all, but performing a collier's dance. It was not labour, but a fiesta.

So it seemed to Dasha. Everything that was taking place here that thrilling September night, in the Third East level deep below the ground, under the low vaults where the miners' lamps flitted to and fro like wandering torches in the dark, where the pneumatic hammer sang its endless song and the coal crashed down in a merry, noisy cascade—everything struck Dasha as being a fantastic festival in which her Victor was the sole hero. Tears of delight—or perhaps they were beads of perspiration?—poured down her face, and she made no attempt to wipe them away. It was extremely hot in the working, hot and stuffy. A cloud of prickly coal-dust hung almost motionless in the air. Dasha's throat was full of it. But she had been used to it since childhood and hardly noticed it. She was gripped by a wild excitement, probably more so than Victor himself. She crawled after him through the working, whispering:

"Keep it up, Victor, keep it up, darling, beloved!"

Amid the crash of falling coal Victor heard nothing.

"A drink!" he said hoarsely, without pausing in his work. Dasha hastily handed him a bottle of mineral water which she had solicitously brought with her. Victor took two or three thirsty draws at it, handed it back and flung himself into the battle again. He did not even thank her, did not know what it was he had drunk.

Andrei, too, crawled along at Victor's side, slightly ahead of him. He crawled along in silence. He uttered not a single needless word, did not urge his comrade on or whisper encouragement to him. He merely lighted the way with his lamp, bringing it quite close to the coal-face. Andrei yielded the palm to Victor in hewing skill

and strength, but he read the book of the coal strata better than his friend. When Victor for a moment lost his bearings in the seam, Andrei showed it to him with his lamp. He was like a pilot, navigating the tortuous bends of the coal river for his friend, pointing his course to victory and glory. Not for a moment did he envy Victor or regret having yielded to him his right to attack the record. Andrei had done his part. There was no more envy in his attitude towards Victor than there is in an aircraft designer towards the pilot, a stage director towards the actor, an architect towards the people who will dwell happily in the fine bright house he has built.

Other thoughts and hopes, as yet hazy, dim and beyond power of expression, thronged Andrei's mind that night. Had he then recollected his recent dreams of peaceful bliss under his own willow trees, he would have found them ludicrous and petty. But he did not recollect them.

Prokop Maximovich crawled into the working. He sat down, puffing, on a heap of coal. Lately his heart had been acting queerly, and he found it more difficult to crawl back and forth among the workings; but the old man never admitted it to anyone, not even to himself. When he had recovered his breath, he shouted:

"You're doing fine, son! You've got the folks below running round in circles—"

"What?" Victor asked in alarm, switching off his hammer. He had not caught the old man's words.

"I say, you're doing splendidly. Go ahead, don't worry! I'm looking after the timberers."

"Ah!" the coal-hewer laughed. He turned on the air again and resumed his work.

The avalanche of rich, grey-black coal rolled down the gallery of pine props. The coal collected round the props, but did not stay there long. Great chunks toppled down on it from above in an endless stream and formed a seething whirlpool.

Below, in the haulage tunnel, Svetlichny darted back and forth.

"Get a move on!" he cried hoarsely to the chute-drawers, shovellers and horse-putters. "Come on, boys, don't hold up the work!"

Victor went on hewing. Never had he hewed the coal with such fierce fervour. Never before had he such free scope, so much elbow room. It made him drunk. Never, it seemed, would his arm tire from hacking and hewing. Here it was, the miner's joy—to bring down the coal strata, eat into their very bowels! Did people up there, on the surface, realize how hard Victor Abrosimov, the coal-hewer, was working for them?

He was working now on the fifth bench. He had no idea how long he had been working and asked no one. Sometimes, when pausing for a minute to check the air pressure or oil his tool, he roughly estimated how much coal he had cut. And every time he thought it very little, although he had never cut so much coal in his life at one go. "Just the same it's not enough! Not anywhere near Stakhanov's figure!" and then he would fling himself into the battle with renewed energy, drive into the seam, throwing his whole weight upon the instrument, bringing the chunks down with a sharp twist, and thinking all the time of Stakhanov. Victor had never seen him. He had not even heard his name before. What was he like, this Stakhanov? Young or old? A local man or an outsider? Perhaps he was a brawny giant, like Nikita Izotov, or just a puny little fellow like Sergei Ocheretin? Who had been his teacher? What secrets did he know that Victor did not know? "Just the same I must beat you, Alexei Stakhanov! Sorry, can't help it!"

Suddenly, with a sobbing shudder, his pneumatic hammer went dead. Simultaneously, his own body, till then vibrant and braced with the ecstatic thrill of labour, went limp and lifeless. He refused to believe what had

happened, shook his hammer violently as if he would return life to it by this means. But the hammer was dead, the breath of life was gone from it and it began to grow cold in his hands. And then Victor experienced what an airman feels when his engine stalls during flight.

He shouted, gasping:

"Air! A-ah! Air, damn it."

Andrei and Dasha rushed up to him in alarm.

"What is it?" cried Prokop Maximovich, crawling up closer.

But Victor could not explain. He went on shouting: "Air! Air!" and waved the hammer about. Suddenly he flung it aside and sank slowly to the ground. Andrei picked up the hose. There was no air in it.

"Something has gone wrong with the air-pressure duct or the compressor," Andrei said to Prokop Maximovich in a low voice, and they both crawled out of the working immediately.

Dasha was in a panic, and did not know what to do. The alarmed timberers came crawling up. Victor alone lay silent and lifeless like his air hammer. The cloud of coal-dust that had hung in the air was now dissipated like gunpowder smoke after a battle. It grew quiet again in the working, and the only sound was the tap of falling pieces of coal. Dasha was silent. She understood that no words could comfort Victor in his present distress. It was not words he needed just then, he needed air, hard compressed air in his pneumatic hammer. And she was sitting there, sighing and gazing at him pityingly instead of stirring up the whole pit! Without saying a word to Victor she hurriedly crawled out of the working.

She found everybody in the drift—her father, Andrei, Nechayenko and Pyotr Fomich Glushkov, the chief engineer.

Pyotr Fomich was making excuses:

"I checked everything myself beforehand. I didn't over-

look a thing. I even specially instructed the deputy to keep an eye on the air pressure."

"What deputy?"

"Makivchuk."

"Makivchuk?" cried Andrei. "But how could you . . . how could you trust such a man?" He controlled himself immediately, however. "Where is Makivchuk?" he asked hoarsely, and, without waiting for a reply, rushed down the drift.

Victor still lay on the ground, motionless. To him this was no trivial accident, it spelt disaster, ruin, it was the end of everything. He had crashed, and all that he had accomplished that night, putting all his heart and soul into it, was worth nothing. The heaps of coal he had already cut seemed worthless to him. What if there was coal if there was no record. He had gone out that night to attempt the record, gone as if it were some gala event, the greatest event of his life, and now. . . .

Suddenly Dasha came back, panting. She crawled into the working and shouted:

"It won't be long, Vitya darling! There'll be air in a minute!"

"Air!" Victor started up, seized his hammer and pressed it. The hammer was lifeless.

"It's a lie!" Victor cried vehemently, shaking the hammer. "Where is the air?"

"Wait a minute, darling. It'll be all right. You see . . . Makivchuk . . . the swine—"

"Ah! It'll be all right, eh? But when? Tomorrow perhaps?"

"What are you shouting at me for?" Dasha said piteously, on the verge of tears. "It isn't my fault!"

But Victor could keep silent no longer. He had to vent his feelings on somebody.

"You're a fine lot, all of you!" he stormed. "None of you care a hang! You've left me in the dirt."

The unfairness of it took Dasha's breath away.

"How can you . . . how can you say that? Why, I . . . Oh, I love you, Vitya!" the confession escaped her involuntarily.

But at that moment the air rushed into the hose with a sharp hiss, like a fresh wind in the steppe.

"Air! Air!" young Zakorluka yelled in a transport of delight.

"Victor, air!" Dasha cried joyously, grasping Victor's arm. He waved her roughly aside.

"Get out of the way!" he cried. The hammer quivered in his hands, and he was all aquiver himself with eagerness and joy. Dasha took no offence. She knew that another, greater passion was now raging in the hewer's breast, and she was not jealous of it.

"He doesn't love me, but never mind!" she thought. "Never mind! I love him. And no one can take that from me. I am happy because I love. And I love him as he is—rough, unfeeling, but lovable. Perhaps he'll understand it some day and get to love me, too."

Victor, hewing nervously at the coal, was preoccupied with thoughts of his own. "I wonder whether I'll be able to make up for lost time! I must! I must! What time can it be? Ugh, the damn air, how it let me down!" The hammer, however, worked smoothly and there was plenty of pressure in it. Gradually the hewer recovered his former calmness and confidence.

"What was that she said about love?" he suddenly recollected Dasha's behaviour. "Ah! Yes, of course! She meant her family. They all love me as if I was one of them . . . rather awkward even. And I was rude to her. Tut, that's too bad!" But he had no time for such reflections.

He went on hewing the coal with dogged and untiring energy. More and more people kept coming up into the working behind him, but he did not see them. They talked

among themselves, but he did not hear them. Zhuravlyov came upon the scene, and even this he failed to notice. He was cutting coal, oblivious now of Stakhanov, of his record, all afire with excitement and the joy of familiar labour, the source of all his pleasure and his sole reward.

He did not come to himself until the end of the last bench, when he perceived that there was nothing more for him to do.

"Is that all?" he said, disappointed, lowering his hammer.

He was instantly surrounded by a crowd of people. Many of them he did not recognize in the dark.

"You've finished, Victor!" Uncle Prokop cried joyfully. "The shift is just over too."

"How much have I done?" Victor asked anxiously.

"According to my estimate, not less than a hundred and fifteen. You've beaten the record! I congratulate you!"

"Hurrah!" cried Dasha, and everyone rushed up to hug and kiss the hero.

Still drunk with the fervour of labour, ready to go on hewing without end, he pressed the hands held out to him, responded to the embraces and kisses, muttering incoherencies of delight. He kissed Dasha, too, without being aware of it. It was their first kiss. It occurred in the pit, with coal-dust on their lips and teeth.

Svetlichny greeted the hero in the haulage tunnel.

"Look!" he said, pointing to the loaded tubs, then to the chute from which the coal was flowing into the tubs in a lavish stream. "All that coal is yours! Seven railway trucks at least."

Victor gazed wonderingly at the chute, as though he had never seen it before, and at the stream of coal falling into the tub. Yes, it was splendid coal, rich and heavy-grained. A few hours ago it had stood like an indestructible wall in the bowels of the earth, stood where it had stood for millions of years until Victor had tackled it.

Now it would go to the surface for people's use. And suddenly Victor felt that there was no greater honour upon earth than that of being a miner.

"Well, miners, come along!" he commanded loudly, and they all followed him outbye in a noisy crowd.

It was the start of Victor Abrosimov's triumphal procession, the morning of his fame and glory.

At the top the first to meet him was Sergei Ocheretin, looking wild and tousled.

"They say you've done a hundred and fifteen tons—is it true?" he asked in a low eager voice.

"It is! And one could do still more!" Victor answered.

"Why, it's . . . it's a miracle!" Sergei gasped, clutching Victor's arms. "How d'you do it?"

"Ask Andrei over there, he's the miracle-maker," laughed Victor over his shoulder as he was drawn along by his friends.

Outside the check-gate a big crowd was waiting for him. Early in the morning, by some mysterious means, the news of the record had flown through the mining town. Men and women came running down to the pit from all sides, as they always did on gala occasions at the mine, or when an important visitor arrived, or when a disaster occurred, for the mine was meat and drink, life and breath to all these men, their wives and their children.

"Comrades!" Nechayenko shouted, jumping up on to an overturned tub. "Last night a big thing was accomplished in our pit. Look at that man"—pointing to Victor. "He hewed over a hundred and fifteen tons of coal in a single shift! Hey, Victor!" he cried gaily to the hero. "Let people have a look at you!"

"That's right!" voices were raised, and the whole crowd began cheering.

Victor, covered with confusion, got up on the tub. The pneumatic hammer was still on his shoulder, and he

stood thus facing the people. Thousands of eyes were trained upon him. He saw them, all shining with love and affection. The eyes of the people. Not even in his fondest dreams could Victor have expected anything like it.

"Three cheers for the heroic Soviet miners!" Nechaenko roared, and tumultuous cheers rolled across the square. Flowers appeared from somewhere or other. Huge generous bunches of autumnal flowers, lots of them. They rained down on Victor, and he pressed them carefully and lovingly to his breast. His arms were so full of them that he had to give the rest to Dasha and his friends to carry.

He was kept on the tub for quite a long time, bowing to the people on all sides, for he could not make speeches.

At last the crowd fell back and cleared a passage for him. He went forward with the crowd following behind in a procession. More and more people kept joining the procession as it went along. Others hurried into their gardens, cut flowers and threw them at the hero.

Dasha stepped out blithely at Victor's side, marching in step with him as though on parade. She walked arm in arm with the hero, laughing gaily all the way. She felt so happy, so tremendously happy! She no longer concealed her love and seemed to be throwing a challenge to the world: "Yes, I love him, I love him! And I make no secret of my love!" her whole defiant aspect seemed to say. "Look, people! Look, girls, neighbours, gossips! This is the boy I love! Here is my beloved!" They could call her a shameless hussy—what did she care! She even snuggled up to Victor and looked up into his eyes, asking: "Well, are you happy?"

Was he happy? No words could have answered that question. Victor was supremely happy, dazed with happiness. He had often dreamt of fame and glory, but never had he imagined it would be like this. He had sometimes thought of fame as meaning official honours, money, re-

wards, medals. But he realized now that the most precious of all rewards was the love of the people, the approval of his workmates and friends. How did it happen that he had now become the most beloved man at the Maria? Why did people smile to him so affectionately? What had he done to earn such love?

Suddenly he recollected how, five years before, he had walked down the whole hall towards the platform, head lowered with shame, while people had followed him with hard eyes, and the old woman in the Budyonovka cap had drilled him through and through with a look of hate. But this memory, which had once pursued him long and painfully, now did not ruffle the serenity of his joy. "Ah, well!" he thought cheerfully. "The people are always right and fair. I did bad work then and I deserved the disgrace. I'm working well now and have earned their esteem." He threw his head up and looked around him boldly.

An hour later all was quiet in the mining town. The crowd had broken up and people had gone their separate ways. Andrei and Victor were asleep.

In the Colliery Party Committee room Zhuravlyov was taking his leave of Nechayenko.

"That's arranged, then," Zhuravlyov said, picking up his cap. "Call a meeting of the Party Committee today. A special resolution about Abrosimov's record has got to be adopted. This initiative must be followed up."

"I was thinking of holding a meeting in the stint room."

"By all means. The main thing is that any attempt to minimize Abrosimov's record should be nipped in the bud. And such attempts are bound to be made."

"I don't doubt it," Nechayenko smiled. "There are sure to be windbags who will go about saying the whole thing has been specially engineered, just a fluke."

"That's it. That kind of talk's got to be squelched right away."

The telephone rang. Nechayenko picked up the receiver.

"Hullo," he said. "Yes. . . . No, this is Nechayenko speaking. He's here. Just a minute." He handed the receiver to Zhuravlyov. "It's Comrade Rudin asking for you."

"Hullo, Semyon Petrovich. Good morning!" Zhuravlyov said, smiling into the telephone. "What? Why, yes. . . . But wait a minute!" he suddenly frowned. "Wait a minute!" He sighed resignedly. "All right, I'm listening. Yes. I see. . ." his voice trailed off drearily. "What? What did you say?"

Nechayenko watched him anxiously.

"What? What? Hullo! Hullo!" Zhuravlyov shouted, then shrugged his shoulders in perplexity and replaced the receiver. "He's hung up!"

"What's the matter?" Nechayenko asked.

Zhuravlyov slowly raised his eyes to Nechayenko's face, and said after a pause:

"Rudin considers Abrosimov's record eye-wash, window-dressing."

"What?" Nechayenko shouted.

"Yes, eye-wash."

"What d'you mean?" Nechayenko stammered. "Perhaps he's offended that we've done it without his knowledge?"

"I don't know," Zhuravlyov said slowly. After a thoughtful pause, he repeated: "I don't know."

* 20 *

My plane landed in the Donbas on September 2nd, and the same evening found me sitting in the private office of Nechayenko, the Secretary of the Steep Maria's Party Committee.

That day the radio broadcast a *Pravda* news item concerning Stakhanov's record. I was surprised that my newspaper had sent me to the Steep Maria instead of the Central Irmino Mine.

I put the question frankly to Nechayenko.

He smiled.

"Stakhanov's record has already been beaten at our mine."

"Really? Who by?"

"Coal-hewer Abrosimov."

"May I see him?"

"Certainly. When?"

"Right now."

"Impatient, aren't you!" the Secretary laughed. "You're a newspaper man all right. Still, it can be arranged. I believe they're both at home."

"Both?" I queried blankly.

"Why? Do you want to write only about Abrosimov?" Nechayenko asked in surprise.

"Who else should I write about?"

"I thought you'd mention Andrei Voronko, too."

"Why? Has Voronko beaten Abrosimov's record already?"

The Secretary shrugged his shoulders.

"Everybody's got records on the brain!" he said. "As if it's merely a question of records. Anyway, come along! I bet you Abrosimov himself will start talking about Voronko. They're a couple of inseparables."

He put some papers away in the safe, locked it and said:

"Come along!" Then he glanced at me with a faint twinkle of amusement and asked in a casual sort of way: "Have you ever been down a mine before?" in a tone in which airmen usually ask passengers before the take-off: "Have you ever flown before?"

"I was born here," I answered curtly.

"Where?"

"Here, at the Steep Maria."

"Oh!" Nechayenko murmured vaguely. He glanced at me sideways, but said nothing more.

We went outside. Some men were sitting about on benches under the acacias, probably members of some trade union committee gathering for a meeting, I concluded. Thus, in the evenings, do collective farmers gather outside the village club, Red Army men in the "Lenin Corner," and the parents' committee in the teachers' room. It was 7 p. m.—the hour favoured by committee men. Nechayenko exchanged greetings with the men, and we proceeded down the street.

The sun, its day shift over, sank slowly and wearily behind the low hills amid a welter of crimson. Its disc was coppery red, like the flushed face of a soldier after a hot battle.

Such sunsets are said to herald a windy day. In the Donets steppe, however, it is always windy. And sundown here is always disquieting—at least, so it seems to me. There is nothing idyllic about it. It has a disturbing effect, leaving one with a restless longing for the coming day. There is no evening calm either—the din and clang of day floods the nights. The sky, too, is covered with restless, reeking, reddish clouds of smoke which dim the sun. And instead of the languid curfew of evening bells, a chorus of impatient whistles rends the air.

Perhaps that is why one's reveries here at sundown are different too. They are not the languid sentimental meditations of eventide, but turbulent and daring dreams of valour. You dream, not of a neat little cottage in the shade of acacias, but of remodelling the world, making it a place of joy and happiness for all. And all that you have done in life seems little, and all you would yet accomplish seems to lie within your grasp. Is that perhaps why the Donets soil so liberally begets revolutionaries

and innovators? Could that explain Stakhanov? However, that may just be my fancy.

We walked down Office Street in silence. It is now called Ilyich Prospect.

"I'm new to the mining business," Nechayenko said suddenly. "I'm a Black-Sea man." He suddenly halted and looked at me guardedly. "Anything wrong with that?"

"Why, no. Black Sea? Fine!"

He burst out laughing.

"That's what I think, too. You know," he continued in a more pacific tone. "I'm the son, grandson and great-grandson of fisher folks. Soaked in brine! Did you ever eat our flat-fish? And grey mullet?"

"Mackerel too," I answered in the same tone.

"Good for you! But now I consider myself a native of the Donbas. I've done with mackerel, and let me warn you there isn't a more fiery patriot in the Donbas than me."

"Is that so?"

"Yes! And don't you forget it! But it still puzzles me. Now, you're a local man—tell me, what is it about this country that gets you?" He halted again and looked at me inquiringly. He was of that likable breed of people who are unable to speak while walking, especially under stress of emotion. "What is its power?" he repeated. "After all, there are not so many real true-born Donbas men here. They are mostly folks from outside—Kursk, Orel, Smolensk and Gomel, Tatars and Mordvinians. But once a man lives here three or four years he considers himself a native. Proud of it, too."

"I can easily understand a man being proud of the Donbas. It warms the whole country."

"Yes..." Nechayenko uttered reflectively. "This Donbas takes a strong hold on a man's heart. It really is the national 'coal bunker.' Life here is always boiling. Well,"

—with a toss of his head—“I’m of the mining family now! If I ever go to study it’ll be at the Mining Institute.”

We arrived at the hostel, but our heroes were not there. The door was even locked.

“Damn it!” Nechayenko cried, striking his forehead. “What a fool I am! Clear as daylight! Who’s going to sit at home on such an evening? Come along! I know where they are.”

“Where are we going now?”

“To the summer garden! Come on!” he said impatiently.

I realized by this time that I was dealing with a restless highly strung soul, and yielded resignedly. We hurried out into the street.

“They’re in the garden, that’s clear!” Nechayenko went on, waving his arms impatiently. “Everybody goes there in the evening . . . open air . . . Come on!” he snapped, although I was making the best use of my legs as it was. “You ought to know this garden, being a local man.”

Yes, I knew that garden. It was once called the Director’s. There, behind a high barbed-wire fence, had stood a two-storey house of un-Russian architecture, with an un-Russian gabled roof and balconies. The Belgian director had lived in that house with his children Albert, Ernest and Maria. We knew their names because the philoprogenitive director christened all the new shafts after his children.

None of us children from the Maria had ever been in that garden. We had merely peeped at it through the chinks. Perhaps that is why it struck us as being a vast fairyland, a magic scene from Scheherazade. Everything in that garden seemed wonderful to us—the white stone house with the colonnade (“a real palace!”), the boats on the mirror-like pond, the flower beds around the fountain, the strange noble games the director’s children amused themselves with (afterwards, when that garden

became our own, we learnt those games—croquet and lawn tennis) and the young Belgians themselves, unbelievably clean and dainty in snow-white flannel trousers. Even the trousers seemed wonderful to us, for at that time no one else had worn white trousers in our settlement.

It was not until many years afterwards—after the October Revolution—that I first set foot in that garden. I have seen many fine gardens and parks in my life, far richer than this one, but none do I enter with such a thrilling emotion and involuntary awe as this garden of my childhood, the first garden whose gates the revolution threw open to me, Sergei Bazhanov, an urchin of the Steep Maria.

We went into the garden. Nechayenko had no great difficulty in finding the two we were seeking—everyone here knew them and had seen them. Within five minutes we were gathered in an arbour on the old lime avenue.

Nechayenko introduced me, and the boys shook hands with me one by one.

“Abrosimov.”

“Svetlichny.”

“Voronko.”

Naturally, I pounced first on Abrosimov, the winner of the world's record. He was the most arresting, picturesque figure in the group, anyway—exactly what one imagined a miner lad should be, complete with a shock of curly hair, a tuft of which hung over his right eyebrow.

Abrosimov was handsome in that vivid definite style of masculine beauty which even male friends acknowledge. In fact, it appealed more to men than it did to girls—the latter, if anything, were frightened of it. The most notable features in a face emanating force, daring and bravado, were his eyes and mouth. They were the eyes of a dreamer, the jaw of a fighter. Abrosimov's eyes were black: not velvety black, moist or oily, but fiery black. They were neither shifty nor secretive, and they did not

glimmer with a cold inscrutable glint. They flamed. Flamed with a golden light. They were akin to the sparkling coal that he mined with such valour in the pit.

More characteristic than his eyes, was Abrosimov's mouth. It was a strong, ferine mouth, never at rest for a moment. Abrosimov was either talking, or smiling, or laughing, or biting his lower lip as if he were about to whistle. His lips were always parted. They were thin lips, and could not fully cover his sharp teeth which protruded in a truculent way. It made him look as if he was grinning all the time.

Oddly enough this did not mar his handsome face, but rather imparted to it a wild untamed beauty. It was the rapacity of a hawk and not of a polecat.

"I am what I am!" his bared teeth seemed frankly to declare. "Beware of me, but don't be afraid, I won't strike you from behind."

However, it was difficult to judge Abrosimov at the moment. He was still intoxicated with the fumes of sudden success and fame. The world record! Stakhanov beaten! Here, indeed, was something to turn a poor boy's head.

I realized that he was not yet accustomed to the new "skin" of a famous hero. It was flattering but prickly. He did not know what to say, what to do and how to behave. He was the only one of the three in full feather, complete with collar and tie. There was something stiff and solemn about him at the moment, even pompous, due to a sense of awkwardness and emotional stress. His two unassuming friends, sitting silently on either side of him, looked like flag sentinels.

"Your name is Victor, I believe?" I asked, somewhat irresolutely, when the introductions were over. My first sight of the hero stirred some faint chord in my memory.

"Yes, Victor."

"I think I've met you before."

"Really?" Victor sounded pleased. "I don't remember."

"I may be mistaken. But five years ago, in November it was, I believe. . . . Wasn't it you and your comrade who were returning from the railway station?" I chose my words carefully.

"Ah!" Victor muttered, his face darkening. Then he said quietly: "I don't deny it."

"There were two of you," I added rather lamely, feeling awkward myself.

"I was the second one," Voronko said quietly and calmly.

Nechayenko stared at us in surprise. He was an inquisitive man. People's "life histories" always interested him.

"Oh!" he exclaimed. "So you're old acquaintances?"

Voronko explained with restraint:

"The comrade saw us running away from the mine."

"I did not. I saw you going back to it."

"What if we did want to run away?" Victor said with a defiant toss of his head. "Anyway, we didn't quit it."

"And we've even beaten Stakhanov's record."

"Don't you believe them, Comrade Correspondent!" the third lad, Svetlichny, said mockingly. He was a thin, lanky boy with a wild crop of hair. "It's just what they are! You knew them as deserters. And now we got to know that they're window-dressers, too."

"Window-dressers? What d'you mean?" I was dumbfounded and stared blankly at Nechayenko. He was smiling.

"No sense in bringing that up, Fyodor!" Victor said with a frown of displeasure. "Just our little family squabbles. They can't interest the Comrade Correspondent."

"It's a fact, though," Nechayenko said with a grin. "They were called window-dressers."

"I can't believe it!" I cried.

"No more can I!" the Secretary said with a twinkle.

"But that's done with now that the *Pravda* has written about Stakhanov's record," laughed Svetlichny.

"Still, in the meantime we're accused of being window-dressers!" Voronko said in a low voice. He was sitting hunched up, his head drawn deep into his shoulders. They were the broad, dependable shoulders of a staunch friend. His face was quite different from that of Abrosimov's. Everything in Voronko's face was hazy and indeterminate, even the colour of his hair, which was neither fair nor reddish. His eyebrows, eyes, and cheeks, were of the same indefinable colour, while his nose, chin and mouth were vague and formless. His whole face, moreover, was covered with a generous sprinkling of freckles.

Yes, it was hardly a striking, clear-cut or expressive face. It seemed to lack lustre, and only for a fleeting moment, when a shy fugitive smile crept into it as though by accident, did Voronko's face become transfigured.

Smiling, however, was not characteristic of him. He smiled rarely. He struck one as being rather too serious for his age. In fact, he looked older than he was, older than Victor, older even than Svetlichny. He was stolid and dignified in an old man's way. And this was not an affected manner; it was inbred. One often meets it in young men who had started fending for themselves at an early age.

Nevertheless his most characteristic features were his eyes and forehead, as with Victor his eyes and mouth.

Andrei Voronko's eyes were not of the kind that immediately attract attention. They were rather small, and deep set under arching brows. When Andrei, in a thoughtful mood, knitted his brows, as he was in the habit of doing, his eyes receded almost out of sight. They were light

in colour and changeful—now grey, now blue, or green, and sometimes quite colourless, absent-looking. But they reflected with remarkable fidelity the inner workings of an active mind, all the more intense and concentrated for being set off by an impassivity of face and immobility of body.

Over those eyes loomed a wide, high, lumpy forehead, like a rugged bluff overhanging a river. His forehead gave an impression of great strength of character, tenacity of purpose and even stubbornness. Voronko even walked with his forehead thrust forward like a young bull, ready to butt at any obstacle.

"Window-dressers!" he repeated in the same suppressed voice.

"Quite right, too!" Victor said with a careless laugh. "And here's the pretty little hands that dressed the pretty little window!" He held out to me his big hewer's hands with the blue coal-dust under the nails.

"Not that we mind, personally," Andrei said. "It's the work that suffers, that's the rotten part about it. Flinging words like that about is likely to kill a good thing."

"Too late in the day for that!" said Nechayenko. "The thing now speaks for itself."

"I agree, Nikolai Ostapovich. You can't kill it, but you can throw a monkey wrench into the works. The way I look at it is this!" Andrei cried with sudden heat, then pulled up sharp and blushed. "I'm sorry, monopolizing all the talk..."

"Go on, Andrei, go on! You speak well."

"Who, me? Don't be silly!" Andrei was thrown into confusion.

"Go on, never mind!"

"Well, then I will, since the newspaper comrade is here," he consented. "You boys will correct me. Now what is the position at present?" he began, turning swiftly

towards me. "We have a single record, Victor's. And before that we had Stakhanov's record. Well, a single record doesn't mean anything so far as the pit's concerned."

"What's to prevent all the other hewers from setting similar records?" Victor cried.

"Do you think they can all do it?" Andrei parried swiftly.

"Why, sure!"

"Every day?"

"Why not?"

"No!" Voronko shook his head gravely. "Not everyone can do it."

I looked at him in surprise. What was he driving at? No one caught his drift except Nechayenko, who was smiling.

"D'you mean to say you can't cut as much coal as me?" Victor asked incredulously.

"Me? Oh, yes."

"And what about Mitya Zakorko, and Sergei, and Zakorluka?"

"Mitya can, so can Sergei, and Zakorluka and Sukhobokov. Any hewer in the pit can do it—"

"Then, what the hell!" Abrosimov cried with annoyance.

"What exactly do you mean, Andrei?" Svetlichny asked him quietly.

"I mean that anyone can set a single record given the conditions that Victor had. Nothing tricky about that. But what we want is that the record—how shall I put it?—well, shouldn't be a record, if you follow my meaning." He was groping for words. He was generally sparing of speech, and spoke slowly, listening to the words he uttered as if trying to catch the sound of them. Very often he winced after uttering a word, as if it was not the one he sought for. His speech dragged behind his thoughts.

"Well, let's put it this way—can a hewer give a record output if tubs, say, are not available?"

"Hardly."

"That means you've got to have the tubs, and you've got to have horse-putters and electric engine operators working the new way, the better way."

"Yes—well?"

"Can you give a record output if there's no timber on the spot, say, or if the air pressure is low, or the drift mining is behindhand?" Voronko struggled on to express his thoughts. "That means that the timber pushers, the drift miners and the fitters—everybody, in a word, must come up to scratch."

"What Andrei means," Nechayenko said with a smile, "is that the whole mine should step up, and all the pit workers of every branch should start competing with each other. Do I understand you aright?"

"Yes. The whole mine," Voronko uttered solemnly. "The whole of Steep Maria."

His friends now grasped his meaning.

"Well, well!" Svetlichny cried, laughing. "The whole mine—why, the Old Man will never get over it!"

"The Old Man's a stick-in-the-mud," Voronko said. "The way I look at it is this: if he doesn't come into line, he ought to be put aside!" He said this in the same level quiet voice, without a trace of animosity.

"And what about the chief engineer?" Victor flung in. "He's not up to the mark either!"

"Yes, the chief engineer as well," Andrei calmly concurred. The next moment he was thrown into confusion. "Please excuse us, Nikolai Ostapovich," he faltered. "We can't judge of course. We're just speaking from our own experience."

"I'm not so sure of that!" Nechayenko laughed, looking fondly at the young miner. "You're one of our theorists, one of our thinkers now, Andrei!"

The boys laughed, throwing Andrei into still greater confusion. Presently they fell to discussing pit affairs again.

I sat listening to them in silence.

I had previously thought that I knew the working man, had known him since I was a child. I had known the old master-craftsmen—the skilled, hard-boiled, hard-drinking, harum-scarum piece-workers; the proletarians proper, penniless, downtrodden, but proud—the administration did not like them, and feared them somewhat. I had known the “solid men”—usually engine operators, mechanics and fitters—who plumed themselves on being men of property, cut off from the “riff-raff” by the high wattle fences that enclosed their patch of land with a ramshackle “cabin” on it. I had known the “riff-raff,” too, those hard-driven work horses of the mines, whom life cruelly swept across the inhospitable land from colliery to colliery, from gold to coal, from pot-house to jail, from pit to grave. I had known the lone individuals, struggling in vain to work their way up to a clerkship. Those men were neatly dressed, belonged to temperance societies, and the only solace of their scrimping, meagre, lonely life was a guitar with a blue or red bow tied to it. I had also known studious workers, lovers of serious books and choir singing; I had known bookwise old men, tireless seekers after a righteous god. I had known revolutionaries too. Perhaps the most vivid memory of my childhood was the occasion, on the eve of the Revolution, when I, a little scribe with a legible hand, was called upon by our neighbours to take down from dictation an ultimatum from the strikers to the management.

I got to know the workers still better after the Revolution. I saw them tighten their belts and go out empty-bellied to pump clear the flooded pits. I saw them on scaffoldings and in foundation pits, and in the work battalions of enthusiasts. I wrote about them.

And now three young workers sat facing me, unfamiliar and baffling. I had never met that type before. They possessed the splendid skill of the master-craftsman, the pride of the proletarian and the enthusiasm of the shock-worker. But they were neither master-craftsmen, nor proletarians, nor yesterday's shock-workers. They were quite a new type of men. That much I understood, but I must admit that they puzzled me at the time.

Not until two months later, when I heard Stalin speaking at the Stakhanovites' conference, was I able to piece together my fragmentary impressions into a single coherent pattern. Listening to Stalin, I thought of Andrei and Victor, who were sitting next to me in the Kremlin Palace. It was of them Stalin had used the words "... new people, people of a special type. . . . There were no such people, or hardly any such people, some three years ago . . . people with culture and technical knowledge. . . . They are free of the conservatism and stagnation of certain engineers, technicians and business executives; they are marching boldly forward, smashing the antiquated technical standards and creating new and higher standards; they are introducing amendments into the designed capacities and economic plans drawn up by the leaders of our industry; they often supplement and correct what the engineers and technicians have to say, they often teach them and impel them forward, for they are people who have completely mastered the technique of their job and who are able to squeeze out of technique the maximum that can be squeezed out of it."

Like me, our two heroes listened to Stalin with bated breath. He was revealing to them what they themselves were, the feelings they were actuated by, the thing that they had accomplished, the aims they were pursuing.

But that was to come in November 1935. Now, in September, in the summer garden of the Steep Maria Col-

liery, the boys were still discussing the likely outcome of Stakhanov's and Abrosimov's records, talking about coal, output, the mine and miners' affairs with that fervour which only Soviet people are capable of when they talk about their work, while I sat listening in thoughtful silence. Quite suddenly I found my thoughts had carried me far away to a wintering station in the Arctic—just as when actually in the Arctic, my thoughts would suddenly carry me back here to the Steep Maria, the Donbas.

These must be busy days in the Arctic, I thought. Open water. The Kara Sea expedition in full swing. Caravans of timber ships sailing from Igarka. Planes flying far out to sea on ice reconnaissance. Day-and-night work at Dickson Bay, loading and unloading cargoes. September rain. The cliffs are dark and wet. The sea-beast hunters out in the grounds since early morning. The radio operators are doing two and three watches at a stretch, running occasionally into the mess-room for a bite. Bustle in the mess-room. Men coming and going. Meetings, send-offs, packing of suit-cases, bits of string on the floor.

At the cherished hour, all who can spare the time gather round the loud-speaker to listen in to Moscow. To-day they will hear the *Pravda* news item concerning Stakhanov's record. If I know our boys at all, they will take a keen interest in this brief report. And afterwards, over the evening coffee in the mess-room, they will discuss it animatedly among themselves. Someone will mutter: "Lucky devils, those miners! They get all the glory." And the next day, at the steering wheel of the ice-breaker, at the controls of the aeroplane, on the watch in the radio cabin, the boys will remember this newspaper report and perhaps even the name of the Donets hewer, Alexei Stakhanov, and his unprecedented record . . . and it will linger long in their minds.

I spent practically the whole of September 1935 in the Donbas, and those days I shall never forget. It was as if everything around had suddenly been set in motion, had torn away from its moorings and shot recklessly forward, sweeping all barriers before it, bursting all flood-gates and opening up to men such sweeping boundless horizons that it took one's breath away. What was happening in the Donbas those days a poet might have compared to a violent spring flood on the Volga, to an ice-shift in the Arctic when the Yenisei is in spate, or even to a geological upheaval, raising new summits and lands from unplumbed depths. But none of these poetic similes could have done justice to what was taking place in the Donbas in September 1935, when not ice, land or sea, but men were set in motion.

Men. . . . The newspapers were already calling them Soviet *bogatyr*s. Indeed, the miner who hewed six carloads of coal in a single shift would seem to have accomplished a feat equal to those of the legendary heroes of Russian folklore. It defied the imagination—no ordinary mortal, it seemed, could accomplish such a feat. But Stakhanov's record was immediately beaten, and in several mines simultaneously. The competitive spark flew from the pit to the factories and mills. People learned of the doings of the forgerman Busygin, of the Vinogradova girl weavers, of the shoemaker Smetanin. And every working man, hearing those reports, felt a new powerful force surging in his breast.

Every shaft had its heroes—not only hewers, but cutting-machine operators, horse-putters, drift miners, timberers and mechanics. New names kept cropping up and instantly grew famous throughout the Donbas. There was glory enough for all. The overmen, engineers and technologists were having a hard time. The miners literally

besieged them, each proposing something new in his own line and demanding an opportunity to put it into practice. The old system and the old norms were crashing down. The whole Donbas hummed like a disturbed beehive.

A man could not sit at home in quiet seclusion those days—he was drawn towards his fellows. Miners crowded around the newspaper stands outside the check-gates, eagerly reading the reports of new records. They listened avidly to the radio and went to the Colliery Party Committee to hear the news. The news of Stakhanovite records stirred the blood of the quietest men and made their hands itch.

An old-age pensioner, who had long retired to his kitchen garden, appeared at the office demanding work in the pit. A Komsomol boy, Ryabokon, a coal-hewer in Section 2, came running in straight from hospital although still convalescent.

"I'm not ill, I tell you!" he warmly and vainly tried to persuade Nechayenko. "It makes me ill to see folks getting ahead and me doing nothing!"

Surface workmen engaged on auxiliary jobs came to the Partorg, asking him to help them get a transfer below ground. Similar applications were handed in by Uncle Onisim, the hostel manager, and Bulkin the storekeeper—he, too, was an ex-timberer—and the two old men called on Nechayenko every morning to inquire for results.

In those days the Party Committee at the Steep Maria—as at every other colliery—resembled a revolutionary staff. A multitude of non-Party people visited it during that month, some for the first time. The P.C. premises were cramped, and people huddled in the passage, on the porch and in the yard, sat about on the steps, on benches in the front garden, smoking and waiting their turn; others collected under the scarlet maples, and, resting on their picks, pneumatic hammers, crowbars and

cutting wedges like army guardsmen on their rifles, they chatted quietly among themselves on one and the same topic—the new movement, the revolution in the mines.

The same subject of Stakhanovite records, their high wages and changes in the pit was discussed all over the mining town—in the club, in the bachelor hostels, in the public baths, in the dentist's waiting-room, in the dining-room and barber's shop, and even in the little old pub on the market-place, which, by the way, was recently re-named "pavilion."

"Well, who holds the record now?" the barber asked as he lathered my face. "I hear Abrosimov's been beaten?"

"Yes, by Zabara."

"Ah! I know him! Dark-haired chap, isn't he? How's the razor?"

"All right!"

"But Abrosimov hasn't said the last word yet!" the barber ran on. "He and Voronko will think up something new again, take it from me. It's novelty that counts these days in the mining business."

"Does it?"

"You bet! They sink shafts and drive levels by new methods these days. There's that new system of cross heading for forming a longwall face, for instance—heard about it?"

"No."

"To be sure!" And he began telling me about it in a medley of mining and hair-dresser's terms, such as: "they use waste row propping, something like a comb," or "they trim it neatly." What he lacked in technical veracity he made up for in enthusiasm.

But most of all I loved to hang about the stint room those days. It was particularly interesting there. Hot, too. The barber's, the market, the public garden, even the club—all this was the rear echelon, whereas the stint room was the front line. Here the miners took obligations

upon themselves before going into battle, obligations that were well considered. In those days I met no people in the stint room who sat idly and apathetically aloof. All huddled together round their crew leaders.

"Yegor Minaich! I say, Yegor Minaich!" a snub-nosed young man in a helmet, who, judging by the coil of rope at his belt, was a timber-pusher, shouted to his crew leader. "What's your last word, then?"

"No!" Yegor Minaich, an elderly dour-faced miner with a walrus moustache, answered quietly.

"No?"

"No."

"But why, Yegor Minaich?"

"Because I don't want to look a fool."

"But we'll do it, Yegor Minaich, we'll do it! You just listen! Eh, Yegor Minaich?" the lad whispered fervidly, hanging on the crew leader's words. "I'll explain the plan to you again if you like! Eh?"

"No."

"No?"

"No."

"Then what is your last word, Yegor Minaich, eh?"

I heard the same passionate whispering all around me.

"Why can't we do it if others can?" Mitya Zakorko, a handsome lad with flaming-red hair, held forth among a group of hewers. "Say what you like, but I'm going to issue a challenge."

"I'm not so sure of it," his mate answered uncertainly, but the fever was already in his eyes. "It wants thinking over."

"They say Zabara has turned out a hundred and fifty tons at the Red Partisan."

"I doubt it."

"Everyone says so."

"A hundred and fifty? How much has he earned then?" Someone reckoned it up. It was an impressive sum,

but no one was surprised. People were already used to the high earnings of the record-breakers. Big placards were posted up daily in the stint room telling of the output and earnings of various leading workers. A workman generally makes no secret of his earnings and readily talks about it.

"Say what you like," Zakorko went on in a vexed tone, "but I'm going to challenge Victor. It won't be the first time either."

And Zakorko kept his word—I was a witness to it. A meeting was held in the stint room—that was now almost a daily occurrence—at which Victor declared for all to hear:

"I'm going to break the record again, boys! I shan't say any more now, but take it from me—the Steep Maria is going to regain the world record!"

He was still standing on the platform when Mitya Zakorko, with his pneumatic hammer on his shoulder, went up to him.

"And I challenge you, Victor!" he said defiantly, slightly lifting the hammer with his right hand. "I undertake to beat your record on my poor seam. Hear that, everybody?" he cried, looking round. "Make a note of it!"

Hardly had he stepped aside than Sergei Ocheretin came up.

"And I challenge you, too, Victor!" he said, rapidly blinking his thick, whitish eye-lashes. "We know the secret now. I shan't boast, but you can consider me good for a thousand per cent!"

The ball started rolling. The miners came forward and challenged Victor one after another, singly and in crews—drift miners, hewers, timberers, putters and shot lighters. The snub-nosed young man from Yegor Minaich's crew came forward, too. He came at the head of the crew and threw out his challenge in a squawky voice that shook with excitement and pride. Yegor Minaich, following on

his heels gloomy but dignified, endorsed the challenge with a silent nod.

Andrei, who was standing next to me, followed the proceedings closely. Was he pleased? If he was, his face did not show it.

"Well, does this emulation satisfy you now?" I asked him quietly.

"Yes. This is the real thing!" answered Voronko. "The whole mine's on the move!" And he smiled shyly.

Suddenly a worried look came into his face. It puzzled me. At that moment coal-hewer Zakorluka Senior was challenging Victor Abrosimov. Andrei precipitately left my side and ascended the platform, taking up a position next to Abrosimov. I did not learn until afterwards what it was all about. Andrei was afraid these provocative challenges would sting his hot-headed friend into making some rude and insulting retort.

Neither at the moment did I understand the meaning of the little scene that was being enacted there before my eyes. At the window of Section 3, leaning heavily on his stick, stood the colliery manager, the Old Man, and next to him a puny coal miner, a Byelorussian with a light skimpy beard and a long scraggy neck like a stork. He kept craning his neck and standing up on his toes, thus accentuating the resemblance. His face was a study, reflecting every shade of emotion from timidity to intrepid daring.

At last he took the plunge.

"I'll go to it too, eh?" he said in a surprising basso. "Give me your blessing, Gleb Ignatovich!"

"Don't be a fool, Kondrat!" The Old Man checked him contemptuously. "Look at him, an also-ran! Enough to make a cat laugh."

"I will, though," Kondrat repeated doggedly. "We're as good as others."

He suited the action to the word. I saw the colliery

manager's face change as he watched him step forward. It registered amazement, chagrin, dismay and even shame. Why shame? But how was I to know what was taking place in the Old Man's soul, what had snapped and collapsed there when he saw the backward miner Kondrat—one of those for whose fate he had felt such concern—go up to the platform and belligerently thrusting out his skimpy little beard, challenge Victor?

"Look at him! Well, I never!" Victor cried in amazement. "And you Kondrat?" He turned to Andrei with a delighted chuckle and whispered: "Just look what's going on, Andrei! We've stirred folks up all right. A feather in our cap!" Then he suddenly drew himself up, raised his lamp and shouted out gaily at the top of his voice: "I take you on! I accept all your challenges! And from the bottom of my heart I wish you all to beat me! For the good of our old mine. I'll take some beating, though!" he added boastfully. "Go ahead, boys. What do you say, Andrei?"

"That's the stuff!" laughed Andrei. "But you'd better go ahead too. Now I challenge you."

* 22 *

Strictly speaking, it was time for me to be leaving the Steep Maria. My commission there was over and the editors were waiting for my article. I was loath to leave, however, and I had given no time to writing. Every morning I said to myself: "Just one day more! I'll see Victor set a new record and then I'll leave at once." Or: "Now I'll wait till Andrei sets the record. I need it for my article." I didn't need it for my article, I needed it for myself—I could not have explained why. "It's just that I can't bear to leave the Steep Maria," I tried to persuade myself. "It's five years since I've been here." But that was

only a half-truth; I had long since grown inured to my partings with the Steep Maria. It was not the mine I was sorry to part with, it was the people whom I had come to love—Nechayenko, Andrei, Victor, Svetlichny, Uncle Prokop, whom I had known since I was a child; Dasha, whom I was not sure whether I remembered or not, but whom I now met anew as it were. The thought of leaving them now made me feel sad. And so I said to myself: "Oh, one day more!"

And now Svetlichny had gone away to study. Dasha, too, had left for Moscow. Victor set a new world record, which held out all day until the evening when Mitya Zakorko, in the second shift, beat him, as he had promised to do. And then, at last, Andrei Voronko went out to attempt the record.

A couple of days before this, Andrei, on Nechayenko's motion, had been elected Partorg of the pit section in which he worked as hewer. In Andrei's Party life this was his first important elective office, and everyone understood the emotion and diffidence with which he shouldered the responsibility. None of the Communists, however, gave the slightest sign that they understood the young Partorg's feelings, which were spared by a tacit avoidance of any words of indulgent approval. Immediately after the meeting Prokop Maximovich, the section overman, went up to him to discuss business matters, and I saw both their heads—one fair, the other grey—bent over some papers and drawings (probably the work schedule or a plan of the workings). Once more, the thought of having to leave brought a pang.

Two days later, Andrei attempted the record, at night. I was there, and so was Prokop Maximovich and Victor. Victor now lit the way for his friend with his own lamp.

Andrei worked calmly and steadily, in his plodding, careful way; there seemed to be no verve, no enthusiasm

in his effort, and although the coal came down in a copious stream, and his hammer kept up a steady unintermittent chatter, I told myself sorrowfully that, just the same, Andrei Voronko would not achieve the record. I felt sorry for the young Partorg and then annoyed with him for jogging along in that slow, careful way. It made one long to shake him up, put more go into him! Andrei, however, went on hewing coal calmly and silently, without any fuss or even animation, passing from bench to bench with his hammer like a tiresome woodpecker. If there was any poetry in his work I failed to grasp it. That night shift seemed an endless one to me.

Towards the morning it transpired that Andrei had cut 180 tons of coal, thus setting a new record. Victor was the first to congratulate his comrade, which he did most heartily. Uncle Prokop congratulated him, too. Andrei was an old favourite of his.

In the main level we were met by Nechayenko.

"Well?" He pounced eagerly on Andrei.

"A hundred and eighty." Andrei answered, then suddenly smiled happily in a childish way.

"Splendid!" cried Nechayenko. "My congratulations! There's a Partorg for you!" And promptly added in a vexed tone: "I spent the whole night in Section 1, looking into things. They're in a pretty bad fix there with haulage. You'd think there weren't any Communists on the section for all you hear and see of them. Yes!" he sighed. "Here it's records, there it's a mess. So a hundred and eighty tons, eh?" he nevertheless asked again.

"Yes," Andrei answered, this time shamefacedly, as though he felt awkward about it, considering the trouble in Section 1.

"Andrei has beaten us all hollow!" Victor cried delightedly.

"And, mind you, no eye-wash about it, no window-dressing," Uncle Prokop inserted with a chuckle.

Everyone laughed, understanding the hint. The accusation trumped up by Rudin had been proved an absurdity, as Svetlichny had prophesied, but the unpleasant memory apparently still lingered in all their hearts.

"Anyway, no one can call us window-dressers now! Comrade Rudin has been carried away by the movement himself," Nechayenko said, and there was an indefinable undertone in his voice.

We arrived at the shaft. Here everyone already knew about Andrei's record.

"We've been handling your coal all night, Andrei," Lantsov, the underground haulage chief, said in a kindly tone. "The ponies are fagged out."

"You must be cursing me, then?" Andrei said, smiling.

"Not you," Lantsov answered. "Our own backwardness. Now I ask you, Nikolai Ostapovich"—addressing Nechayenko—"how can you expect our ponies to keep up with such coal-hewers? What we need now is electric locomotives."

"Yes, that's true," Nechayenko said thoughtfully. "The pony hasn't a chance these days!" From what I could gather he was thinking not only of the ponies.

When we got out on the surface we went all together to the change-house situated in a little by-lane, just outside the check-gate. It was a single-storey, squat little building of dark-grey stone, brown with age. Before the Revolution it was called the "mine-boss bath," and although the head miners and the engineers seldom used it, since they were not in the habit of going down into the pit, it was built specially for them at a "clean" distance from the mine and the miners. Everything at the old Steep Maria designed for the use of the administration—the cottages for the office staff, the director's house and garden, the doctor's villa and even the new tavern with the billiard room for the "genteel" public—was built

well away from the pit head, as though recoiling from it. The change-house now had grown too cramped for the swiftly developing mine, and among the projects teeming in Nechayenko's brain there was one providing for the construction of a new communal service block at the colliery, complete with a fine spacious steam bath, shower baths, drying room, barber's shop, laundry, medical service and even a cinema hall.

We were approaching the change-house when a motor car swung round the corner and raced past, then immediately pulled up. A tall man in a grey dust-coat sprang lightly out of the car and hailed Nechayenko. It was Rudin. I recognized him, although I had seen him only once for a fleeting moment. So far I had not been able to meet him—he was either busy at the T.P.C. and couldn't receive me, or else he was dashing about the district and was not to be caught. This time he was passing through the Steep Maria on his way to town.

"Just happened to see you. Thought it rather awkward to pass through your land without greeting the masters!" he explained jocularly.

He wore no cap, as usual. The September wind ruffled his rich mop of hair, and perhaps that is why it struck me that his face was like that of a poet or an actor.

Nechayenko introduced me straightaway.

"Ah! Glad to see you here!" Rudin muttered hurriedly, pumping my hand. "Big things are afoot, big things! Plenty to write about! Well, what's the news here?" he switched round to Nechayenko.

"Nothing much, except that Voronko has set a new record," the Partorg answered, pointing to Andrei.

"Has he? How much?" Rudin asked with lively interest.

"A hundred and eighty tons."

I had an impression that the figure disappointed Rudin.

"Really? Never mind, though," he said. "Could you cut three hundred tons?" he suddenly asked Voronko.

"Three hundred?" Andrei queried in surprise.

But Rudin had meanwhile turned to me again. His was a brisk mercurial personality.

"Come down to the Red Partisan Mine in a day or two!" he said cheerfully. "Zabara will have three hundred tons for us. There's something to think over!" He laughed, slapped me on the shoulder, got back into the car and drove off.

For a moment or two we were all silent. The car disappeared round a waste pile, and the dust settled slowly on the road.

"I'll do three hundred tons!" Victor cried suddenly. "Just give me the proper conditions."

"What sort of conditions do you want now?" Nechayenko smiled.

"For one thing, a straight wall—"

"That wants thinking over," Prokop Maximovich muttered doubtfully.

"What's there to think over? It's got to be done. Three hundred's the figure!"

"Whose figure?" asked Nechayenko.

"Comrade Rudin's. Didn't you hear?"

"We heard it all right," Uncle Prokop said guardedly. "Now we've got to think it over."

"But we're not going to let our neighbours beat our record and leave us dangling behind, surely!" Victor cried hotly. "Not if I know it!"

"What does it matter?" Andrei said quietly. "It isn't a question of records now, if you ask me."

It was a queer kind of talk for the morning after the victory. The Steep Maria was the winner of the latest record, yet the victors were discontented. They looked ahead restlessly—what now, what next? Had they reached the limit? They pondered this "limit" idea—and

it dawned on them that there was no limit in their respective levels and boundaries. There was no limit for Victor at the coal-face, no limit for Uncle Prokop and Andrei in their section and perhaps in the whole pit, no limit for Nechayenko. But Nechayenko, it seemed to me, was looking very far ahead, much farther than the others.

"I'm not worrying about myself," Victor said in a hurt tone. "It makes no difference to me who does it. Let Andrei hew three hundred tons, he's the Partorg. All I want is that our mine should have the fame."

"Fame? There are different kinds of fame," Nechayenko threw in mockingly. "See those waste piles, there? The Pyramids, eh? A monument! Look at 'em, rearing their proud heads over everything around! You'd think all the glory of the Steep Maria was theirs. And what are they actually? Just dumps, waste dumps. Of no earthly use to anybody, simply a dusty nuisance. But the coal Andrei cut last night," he continued with sudden heat—"that won't be piled up, oh, no! It'll go into the furnaces tomorrow and be burnt up! But it'll give people warmth and light. And folks will have a kindly word for the hewer who got that coal. What's more, Sergei will write about that hewer in the newspaper!" he wound up gaily. "Won't you, Sergei?"

"I will," said I.

"That much for fame."

Curiosity is said to be a virtue in a journalist. Perhaps it was curiosity that drew me so strongly towards these fine lads? Our paths had crossed rather strangely. Five years ago I had met those boys in the hour of their disgrace, now I saw them in the days of their fame. Perhaps it was just a desire to see what they would be doing next? But I was beginning to realize that it was not a case of mere journalistic curiosity. One would not take the in-

terests of people one hardly knew so close to heart as I did, out of idle curiosity. No, this was something more than curiosity—it was the deep concern of a contemporary for his contemporaries. It was in boys like these that the future of my country was ripening, although the heroes themselves, swept along by the torrent of present-day affairs, perhaps little suspected it.

They had only just started out on their road, and the cares that assailed them were the cares of the wayfarer, and the landmarks visible to them were only the nearest mileposts. Each new landmark they came to revealed to them the next along their road, and they strove onwards without pausing for rest. Their immediate leaders—the Nechayenkos and Svetlichnys—were young, too, and inexperienced. They, too, were wayfarers, maturing from stage to stage, and although they glanced farther beyond the horizon than those they were leading, they could not, of course, pierce the veil of the future with their inward eye.

Only the Communist Party, who had called to life this irresistible movement, pointed out the full grandeur of its meaning, and followed it closely, directing this movement of millions of Andreis and Victors with a wise and careful hand towards its great goal.

During those days I became particularly friendly with Nikolai Nechayenko. We were of the same age, men of the same life pattern. We soon found that we had many acquaintances and even memories in common. It transpired that we had often attended the same conferences and rallies. It was strange that we had not met and become friends before. True, we would have hardly become such fast friends at the busy crush of conferences as we did here, during these exciting days at the Steep Maria.

The strongest and most enduring friendships are those which spring up where men's noblest human qualities

are put to the highest test—at the front, in the Arctic wintering stations, on the high seas, in sharp political strife, or as here—when labour enthusiasm burned at white heat. Here the whole man stood revealed. It was plain who was your enemy and who your devoted friend. Nechayenko was revealed to me here in his noblest aspect—a restless eager soul, loyal in his attitudes both towards duty and people, sometimes brusque and plain-spoken, but always straightforward and candid. Like Svetlichny, he was exacting, but he was more flexible and gentler than the uncompromising Svetlichny. He was more indulgent of human foibles, more prone to forgive them. He liked to “have a go” at “hard cases” and was particularly proud if he succeeded in pulling them out of their difficulties. In short, he was a real Partorg, that is, a Party organizer of the masses with the innate gift of a leader. All the more amazed was I to learn of Nechayenko’s dreams, which he once confided to me.

We were talking about studying—I knew that Nechayenko was dying to go to an institute.

“The Political School, of course?” I asked understandingly.

“No, why?” he answered. “I want to be an engineer.”

“Mining engineer?”

“No, not quite,” he laughed. I was completely stumped. He regarded me quizzically.

“Well, you see, I’d like to build machines,” he said. “As a matter of fact I’m preparing on the quiet, but the trouble is I’m not very good at drawing. . .”

The telephone interrupted us at this point. It was the Old Man ringing. Nechayenko’s relations with him were rather complicated and difficult. They liked each other but could never see eye to eye.

“All right, I’ll come down in a minute,” Nechayenko spoke drearily into the telephone, then he turned to me: “Sorry, Sergej, but I’ve got to see the Old Man—he has

cracked up altogether, lying at home," and he hurriedly left the Party Committee office.

It was some time before we resumed this, to me, surprising conversation. I couldn't imagine Nechayenko—that ring-leader and mass organizer—sitting at a drawing-board, no more than I could Andrei or Victor pottering about a bee-garden or vegetable plot. In those days all human paths seemed straight and marked-out to me. Mentally, I had the scheme of life mapped out for each of these boys, whom I had grown to love. According to that scheme Nechayenko was to be a big Party functionary, Svetlichny a big engineer, Andrei ultimately the colliery manager. Victor was the only one I couldn't fit in anywhere. His place was so obviously the pit working, that I could not imagine him, for instance, within the walls of a university.

Now and again I broached this subject with the boys—it stirred me strangely for some reason or other. I was eager to know what they themselves thought about their future lives, but the happy-go-lucky Victor apparently didn't know himself what he wanted, and didn't bother his head about it, while Andrei closed up like a clam, as he always did when anyone tried to pry him loose. "Time will show!" they would say. And that was the nearest I could get to them.

We often spent the evening together now. Sometimes Nechayenko joined us, but he immediately dragged us out of doors, into the street, to the park.

It was early autumn, the best time of the year in the Donbas. The heat was tempered, and the winds were softer, cooler; the dust on the trees, which had made the foliage grey and lifeless, had been blown off, and the world looked younger, as though spring had returned; even the russet tints of autumn seemed just a healthy young bloom and evoked no thoughts of death and decay. Especially fine were the evenings, charged with the odours

of the steppe and the mine, with just a dash of something pleasantly restless and buoyant about them.

On such evenings everyone, old and young alike, are drawn out of doors; the old go visiting and the young go strolling. There are two favourite promenades in the mining town—the main street, which becomes a “lover’s lane” in the evenings, and the park. Here the gay animated human tide surges all the evening, flooding the quiet avenues and eddying in the centre around the fountain and the flower beds.

Only those who, in their youth, have lived in a southern provincial town or industrial settlement, can fully appreciate the quiet joy and ineffable charm of these evening promenades in the park avenues and down the main street; the languor of youth, the eager craving for love and happiness, the simple wholesome mirth and spontaneous laughter, the proud hopes and sad disappointments, beginnings and outcomes, sad and happy. . . .

Much has changed at the Steep Maria. The park is denser—the new maples and acacias, which were youngsters when I went away (we planted them ourselves one Sunday), have now grown into sturdy manhood. The people are jollier, they look contented and happy. They are visibly better off. The haulage girls parade in new silk frocks, the horse-putters in serge jackets, white trousers and shirts “à la apache.” But the old tradition of “club-revel” is still rigidly observed—the girls and boys walk apart, the girls sedately arm in arm, the boys in noisy groups.

The two streams do not mingle for quite a time. They are like opposing camps. Sometimes a shock-headed horse-putter with his jacket thrown jauntily over one shoulder will pass some cutting remark, and the girl for whom it is intended will toss her head up with a scornful twist of her lips and stalk past amid the ingratiating laughter

of his cronies. Generally, each camp pretends to ignore the other's existence.

But involuntarily they seek one another out with their eyes, which meet for a brief breathless moment only to look down in confusion. Milling round the park with a delightful languor swimming through their veins, the lads think of nothing but their sweet antagonists, while the lasses have no other thoughts but for the lads as they whisper among themselves: "Oh, Dusya, did you notice how he looked at me?" They are drawn irresistibly to one another, and it is the mutual attraction and timorous repulsion, this amorous game with its delightful little ceremonies, artless stratagems and simple wiles that constitute the chief charm of these evening "love parades" in the colliery park.

And then comes the hour when these two streams suddenly, as if by accident, mingle, break up into couples, who, now reconciled, leave the precincts of the park to roam the quiet streets of the town with their arms about each other and linger under the languishing moon.

On such evenings every youth's thoughts turn to love and happiness. We were four young men, and all four unmarried. No doubt every one of us thought of love and happiness, but Victor was the only one who flippantly voiced his thoughts aloud. That meant he was the only one who did not love.

He walked triumphantly through the park, seeking no one in the crowd but responding with impudent alacrity to every maiden glance, chaffing and teasing those he knew, and laughing at the top of his voice. Clearly, this was but a game to him, mere sport. The blood of youth coursed hotly in his veins, but he was still heart-whole.

"Ah, Victor!" Nechayenko said shaking his head. "It's time you married, my dear chap! High time. Just too bad!" He sounded quite like an old man.

Victor burst out laughing.

"Why don't you marry, Nikolai Ostapovich? Set us an example."

I had an impression that Nechayenko was disconcerted. But it must have been my imagination, for the next moment he countered with easy humour:

"How could I! You and Andrei should set the example. You're the ones who set the pace round here."

"No fear! A bachelor's life is good enough for us, isn't it, Andrei?"

But Andrei was silent. Yet it was his opinion about love that I most wanted to hear. This strange lad baffled me. At times he appeared almost a boy, at others, on the contrary, quite grown up and settled in his ways, far more grown up and settled than myself. "His love must be different to anyone else's, if he loves at all," I gave play to my fancy, "and he probably dreams of something out of the ordinary, something beyond my imagination."

I knew nothing at the time about the wordless drama that had been enacted between him and Dasha. Neither did Victor. Victor did not even suspect that that proud, high-spirited, mocking little hussy, whom he did not love himself and rather feared, was actually in love with him. Had he been told he would not have believed it, and very likely not have been glad to hear it. At that time, however, neither he nor I knew anything about it. Roaming about the park in the boys' company I could only speculate what kind of girl Andrei, that secretive, self-contained, peculiar boy, loved or would fall in love with. As for Victor, I wondered what lass would take that wild unruly creature in hand at last. And what of Nechayenko? And myself?

In Nechayenko's company one could not keep one's thought long on any single subject. He was everywhere the ring-leader, the "life of the party," always in the centre of the human vortex. People kept coming up to us in the park, falling into conversation, and soon things

got to be like they were in the stint room—the same jokes, the same talk, the same excitement.

The gay, motley tide of humanity flowed past, with here and there a glimpse of familiar faces I had seen in the stint room, at the check-gate or in the pit-yard. Here is Sergei Ocheretin, arm in arm with his wife, drifting sedately towards the cinema; there, like a flash of flame, the red head of Mitya Zakorko appears in the crowd and instantly disappears; then other acquaintances here, there, everywhere.

Girls are singing in some remote corner of the park, singing merrily, with a gay lilting challenge, sustaining the incredibly high notes by nothing short of a miracle. That is the way they sing at the pit bank, amid the din of screening coal. Music is wafted up from the dance floor, the popping of corks and clink of glasses from the refreshment stand opposite, the rumble of bowls and laughter from the skittle-alley. The air is vibrant with happy young voices, and into this multitudinous hum the colliery weaves its familiar sounds of clanging tubs at the weigh-bridge, the shrill whistle of the shunting engine, the puff and hiss of steam, and some other low droning sound like the buzzing of a bumble-bee or rather the whining of winter wind in chimneys.

It is the whine of the new ventilation fan in the Shubin woods. I had not seen it yet, and at the moment I picture it as the huge gaping mouth of the mine, greedily sucking in the air, and together with it the odours of grass and flowers, the breath of the forest, the vapours of the earth, the wreaths of damp mist from over the quiet pond, the wisps of samovar smoke, the smell of the goat herd, the freshness of the wormwood steppe, the coolness of a bracing September evening—and drawing all this down into the shaft. This air, like a fresh wind, rushes underground, flows in stiff jets through the galleries and drifts, pulls round the airways, knocks at the ventilation

doors, and finally comes sweeping with a hiss and a whistle to the coal-faces where men are working. And men drink it in joyfully. They drink their fill of this familiar heady infusion of the land flavoured with the tang of the steppe and woods. It is the same air which people breathe up there, outbye—the goodly air of their native land.

* 23 *

One evening, in the middle of September, Andrei Voronko came into the office of the Colliery Party Committee. Nechayenko was alone, preparing a report for the next Party meeting. Seeing Andrei standing timidly in the door-way, he got up and went towards him with a smile of welcome.

“Ah! So it’s you! Talk of the devil...” he said, proffering his hand. “Just the man I was thinking about.”

“In what connection, Nikolai Ostapovich?” Andrei asked in surprise.

“There was a connection,” Nechayenko laughed.

He meant it. He had really just been thinking about Andrei. The fact was that he had been preparing for his report “Concerning the First Results of the Stakhanov Method Applied at the Steep Maria (in those days the “Stakhanovite movement” was still referred to as the “Stakhanov method”) and the Immediate Tasks of the Colliery Party Organization.” Everything was ready for the report, all the data were at hand—long columns of figures, a heap of notes, a neatly typewritten list of technical suggestions and the resolution of the Colliery Party Committee. The general aim was clear—from isolated records to a mass movement, from single Stakhanovites to Stakhanovite sections and eventually to a Stakhanovite mine. It only remained to link the whole together, to lay the main emphasis, and the report would be ready. But

Nechayenko was dissatisfied. He had a feeling that he had missed something vital and essential, though he did not know what it was.

He thoughtfully turned over the leaves of his report, and the heap of notes and resolutions. "A whole sea of papers!" he mused mockingly. "Enough to swamp a fellow." Not to be swamped, he suddenly, with an air of decision, pushed the paper sea back, got a booklet out of his pockets—he always carried it about with him those days—and began reading. It was Stalin's address to the graduates from the Red Army Academies. Nechayenko knew it almost by heart, but he found something new in it every time he read it, and every time he wondered how he had not noticed, understood or appreciated one or another idea before.

The feeling came back once again. This time the passage that struck him had a direct bearing on himself and his report.

"People have learned to value machinery and to make reports on how many machines we have in our mills and factories. But I do not know a single instance when a report was made with equal zest on the number of people we have trained in a given period, on how we have assisted people to grow and become tempered in their work." These lines made him think. "Reporting" to the meeting about the advance in technical equipment and coal extraction, and nothing else—that was just what he had intended doing. In his practical daily work, he never overlooked the human equation behind these figures. Then why had he forgotten it the moment he intended taking the platform? Was it just habit? If it was, it was a bad habit! "But I'm mentioning the names of the best people!" he tried to vindicate himself but immediately laughed it down. "Yes, you do, the way you mention the 'names' of machines, seams and sections. That's the way any engineer or administrator would name them. But you're a

Party worker, an educator of the masses. No, the whole report's got to be rewritten! It will be a report about people whom we, the Party, have brought up."

He began to ponder about those people, and they passed before his mind's eye—coal-hewers, timberers, drift miners, horse-putters—the way they had passed the platform of the stint room a week ago, the day before yesterday, challenging each other to competition.

What were their motives? He had to make that clear both to himself and the Party meeting. Was it a craving for big earnings or fame, or was it a spirit of derring-do, eagerness, or conscious enthusiasm? What interests were they pursuing—private or social? Of course, it was a blend of both. It was this that had made the Stakhanov method the success it was. It was a thing readily accepted by the working man. "A good thing for me and a good thing for the State!" as the taciturn hewer Sukhobokov had said the other day in the stint room.

That was well put! Not many a propagandist could have hit on a more succinct and apt formula. Yet Sukhobokov was not a propagandist. Nor was he a Communist. "Why not?" Nechayenko suddenly asked himself. "Why isn't he a Communist? And why hasn't Mitya Zakorko joined the Party all this time? He can't stay in the Kom-somol all his life! And what about Ocheretin? And Zakorka Senior?"

Nechayenko no longer sat at his desk—he was pacing agitatedly up and down the room. "That means I'm not doing my job well as Partorg! I'll have to admit it honestly at the meeting," he thought. "There's a social spark smouldering in every man, even the most backward and unsociable—it only needs fanning. And that's what we, Communists, have got to do, first and foremost. Some people may not know what they are themselves. Take Sukhobokov. Who'd ever think he was a propagandist? But he will be, or I'll eat my hat. And he's not the only

one by a long chalk! There are lots of 'untapped' sources at the mine I know nothing of, men whom we have passed by and written off as backward!" He paced restlessly from window to door and back again with long strides.

"How does a man generally come to join the social stream? Most often through self-criticism. Emulation, as Comrade Stalin teaches us, is just another form of expression of the masses' practical and revolutionary self-criticism. Take the Stakhanov method. What is it? It's the outcome of people's dissatisfaction with the old norms and the old order of things. And so they go and smash them to blazes!" He was smiling cheerfully at the memory of his first talk with Andrei and Victor. You couldn't get away from the fact that it was he, the Part-org, who had first supported the boys' idea. "Well, and what of it?" he pulled himself up sharply. "Nothing for you to boast about! Both Andrei and Victor are active boys. They went about knocking at all the doors themselves. But there are some who won't bother to knock at doors—they'll simply let off steam at the working face or in the hostel, and there the matter will end. The thing, then, is to lend an ear to this self-criticism in the pit and in the hostel. To do that you've got to live among the men, mingle with them everywhere. And if you take notice of a man, don't forget him. See that he gets his chance. Give him scope!"

"But that's what I've always been doing!" Nechayenko remonstrated with himself, stopping in the middle of the room. He recalled at least a dozen people at the Steep Maria whom he had introduced to political life. "I ought to tell the Party meeting about those people! There's Avdotya Filipovna, for instance." The memory brought a smile.

Nechayenko had first taken notice of her in the early spring outside the baker's shop, among a crowd of women. Avdotya Filipovna was expressing her mind about the

bakery. She was a buxom, middle-aged woman in a short warm jacket and a white kerchief, a real miner's wife, well able to take care of herself. She did not mince words.

Nechayenko had stood by, listening. Everything at the colliery, including the bakery, the baths, the shops, housing affairs, the crèches and the stadium, comes within the Partorg's "sphere of influence."

"Look here!" he had said to Avdotya Filipovna when she had exhausted her stock of invective. "You criticize well enough, but what about giving a hand to improve things?"

"But what can I do?" she had asked, nonplussed.

"A lot. You've got a sharp tongue and plenty of fight in you. Keep an eye on the bakery and the shops—there's a job for you. In a word, we'll put you on the Women's Council. What d'you say to that?"

"Right you are!" Avdotya Filipovna answered challengingly and looked round at the hushed women. "I'm not afraid! It's a go!"

Everyone at the colliery now knew Avdotya Filipovna, and Nechayenko himself had no peace—she saw to that. "That woman ought to be a minister of state," was the general comment. And it had all started with the bakery.

Or take Makagon, the haulage foreman. He had long been a member of a sympathizers' group, but no one had ever heard his voice at the Party or general meetings, nor in the stint room. Nechayenko noticed this. And one day, in the pit, when the whole section was held up by a haulage hitch, he quietly beckoned Makagon aside.

"You're a member of a sympathizers' group, I believe, Comrade Makagon?"

"I am," the latter readily and even proudly retorted.

"In what way is this 'sympathy' expressed? Eh?"

The foreman was taken aback.

"I ask, what exactly is this 'sympathy?' " Nechayenko

calmly repeated, pointing to the mud-encumbered tubs, around which a group of swearing men were puffing and struggling.

"What can I do?" Makagon muttered plaintively. "I'm only a little man—"

"A little man?" Nechayenko cried. "Who told you that? Look here," he proposed, "come down and see me at the P.C. office tomorrow—we'll have a chat."

Makagon dropped in. He repeated the visit. One day he came with a notebook. "Just some ideas of mine concerning haulage," he shyly explained, putting on his spectacles. Afterwards he timidly expounded those "ideas" at a meeting. And then, at last, had come the day Nechayenko had long been expecting. Towards the close of the conversation, when he had already got up to take his leave, Makagon asked in a casual sort of way:

"Could you give me the Party Rules, Nikolai Ostapovich? I'd like to read them. I'll let you have them back."

The Party Rules were obtainable at any library, and one need not have applied to the Partorg for them. But Nechayenko understood Makagon's motives and what his request meant. In asking for the booklet, he was asking, as it were: "Well, may I join? Is it time? Am I worthy?" And one had to hand him the Rules in such a way that he would understand: "Yes, you may." After that one would have to have a talk with him. One had to help him find the necessary sponsors. Perhaps act sponsor oneself.

Nechayenko already had quite a few such "godsons" at the Steep Maria. "Godson" and "godfather" were not of course Party words, but Nechayenko could not think of any other. How many "godchildren" did Nikolai Nechayenko have scattered about the country! At the collective farms, on the railways—wherever he had lived and worked. No doubt they still remembered him. One's sponsor, as one's first secretary of the Party organization, is never forgotten!

The thought was pleasant to Nechayenko. A happy little smile appeared on his lips at the recollection of his "godchildren." He went over to the window and looked out into the dark street. Have you ever noticed how difficult it is to let your fancy rove when gazing at the wall of a room? You are involuntarily drawn towards the window. Day-dreaming is easier there, even if there be a wall of darkness or rain outside it. You know that the darkness conceals life and living people, the roads, the town. Suddenly and quite irrelevantly Nechayenko thought of Andrei Voronko.

Andrei was not a "godson" of his. When Nechayenko arrived at the mine, Andrei was already a Party member. Other Nechayenkos fostered Andrei Voronko. There had been many of them—Andrei's first Young Pioneer leader in Chibiryaki; the Komsomol schoolmaster who had taught him to sing *Bandiera Rossa*; Pashchenko; the stern Svetlichny, representative of the Party in the Komsomol; Uncle Prokop of the old guard, and Vorozhtsov. They had all had a hand in Andrei's education, and then passed him over into Nechayenko's hands. When Nechayenko took over from the old Party Secretary, it was not merely files, the safe and these office walls he received—he took upon his shoulders and his conscience responsibility for the living people of the Steep Maria, Andrei Voronko among them. "Well, and what have I done for him?" Nechayenko put it to himself. "How have I helped him? Have I contributed in any way to his progress? Mind you, he is a lad of great promise. Zhuravlyov has noticed it, too. Why, if you put in some serious work with him and polished him up a bit he'd very soon be able to take my place," the sudden thought struck him.

Just at that moment Andrei had come in.

He was in a state of perturbation, but Nechayenko was so glad he had come at this very moment, when he had been thinking of him, that he noticed nothing at first.

"What are you shuffling in the door-way for?" he said. "Come in! Come in! Sit down!"

Andrei, without saying a word, went over to the table and sat down with his cap clutched in his fist. Only then, on closer scrutiny, did Nechayenko become aware that Andrei had some serious reason for this visit.

"What is it?" he asked him quietly.

Andrei took his time in answering. His eyes, as usual with him when he was troubled, were narrowed, almost hidden under his knitted brows, and one could hardly see them, let alone read them. Nechayenko waited patiently for his reply.

"Nikolai Ostapovich!" Andrei spoke up at last in a quiet voice. "I've just been to the Red Partisan Mine."

"Have you? What for?"

"Oh, I just went. . ." Voronko answered hesitatingly.

"Well, how are things there?"

"Pretty bad."

"What did you go there for?"

Andrei tarried again with his reply. He kneaded his cap. Nechayenko watched him closely, trying to fathom the reason for his agitation.

"Zabara hewed three hundred tons today," Andrei breathed rather than uttered.

"Ah, so I've heard! So what?" Nechayenko smiled. "Feeling cut up about it?"

"Why should I?" Andrei sounded surprised.

"I mean to say, he's beaten your record."

"Oh, that? I don't mind that!" he said with a wave of his hand.

"What's the matter then?" Nechayenko asked discreetly. He was very patient. Besides, he knew by experience that Voronko was not to be rushed.

"I had a chat with the men there," Andrei said. "True, I didn't have a chance to speak to Zabara. Comrade Rudin carried him off right away."

"Well, and what do the men say?"

"All sorts of things."

"For instance?"

"What can they say?" Andrei shrugged his shoulders. "The mine's daily plan is eight hundred tons. Actual output varied between seven hundred and thirty and seven hundred and seventy. But this time, what with the record, the whole mine gave only six hundred—that's together with Zabara. They've set a record, but it doesn't give coal! How d'you make that out, Nikolai Ostapovich?" He looked up at Nechayenko for the first time during the conversation, and his eyes were big and strangely sad.

"I can't understand it myself," muttered Nechayenko, disconcerted not so much by the question as by the look in Andrei's eyes.

"The whole pit was working on that record!" Andrei went on, deeply perturbed. "One section suspended haulage altogether—the tubs were all switched over to draw Zabara's coal. The place was upside down, people say. I asked the men—what were you thinking of? But they just scratched their heads. Comrade Rudin's orders, they said—three hundred tons, if you have to stand on your head to do it!" He looked at Nechayenko again.

Nechayenko was silent, however, and Andrei proceeded.

"Now Comrade Rudin is demanding five hundred. He said so right there at the meeting. I heard him myself. He made a fuss of Zabara and sneered at us. We've left the Steep Maria nowhere, he says."

"Is that what got under your skin?"

"Oh, no! It's their mine that worries me. They'll ruin it altogether." He was silent for a space, then suddenly leaned forward, exclaiming: "Nikolai Ostapovich! What's Comrade Rudin doing, eh?" His voice shook. "It's more like a circus than emulation! Pitting us one against the other like it was a cock fight. Is that right?"

"It isn't," Nechayenko said in a deadened voice, avoiding his eyes.

"What are we going to do about it, Nikolai Ostapovich?"

Nechayenko, after a perceptible pause, said quickly:

"Have you spoken to their Partorg about it?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"He doesn't know me. They might tell me to mind my own business."

"Who could tell you such a thing?"

Andrei was silent.

"No, we're not going to mind our own business!" Nechayenko said. "Their business is our business!"

"But Comrade Rudin—"

"What of him? If I, a Partorg of the Central Committee, made a mess of things, would you keep your mouth shut? Would you?"

"No, I wouldn't," Andrei said in a barely audible whisper.

"And quite right, too! I can't keep silent either! If need be we'll write to the Regional Committee and the Central Committee, too!" He suddenly got up and went over to the safe, returning with a paper which he handed to Andrei.

"Read it!" he commanded.

"What is it?"

"A telegram from Sergo Ordjonikidze. Got it today. Read it out."

Andrei began reading, but stopped short at the first words. The telegram started by mentioning the names of the initiators of the new movement. Andrei experienced a thrill of pleasure and awe. "So Comrade Sergo knows about us? Maybe Comrade Stalin too?"

"Go on, read it!" Nechayenko said.

Andrei read on:

" 'This splendid movement of Donbas coal heroes, Party and non-Party Bolsheviks, is new striking proof of what tremendous possibilities we have at our hands and how far certain misleaders, who do nothing but seek excuses for their poor work and leadership, have fallen behind the times.

" 'The main thing now is to . . . organize coal extraction properly and raise labour productivity throughout the Donbas and all other coal-fields. The work of these comrades explodes all the old notions concerning the coal-hewer's output rates. Undoubtedly, their example will be followed by coal-cutting machine and electric locomotive operators as well as tub loaders and horse-putters, and the technical staff will organize and direct this work.

" 'The organization of haulage and all preparatory work must be tackled at once so as to keep pace with the hewers. Frankly, I fear that this movement will meet with vulgar scepticism on the part of certain backward leaders, which will virtually mean sabotage. Such misleaders should immediately be removed.' "

"Hear that?" Nechayenko shouted. "Go on reading!"

" 'Convey my fraternal greetings to the splendid men of the Donbas.' That's all," Andrei said, but instead of handing the telegram back to Nechayenko, he started reading it over again to himself.

"Well?" said Nechayenko. "What have you got to say now?"

"Comrade Sergo warns us here about the haulage bottleneck," Andrei said, knitting his brows. "How many times we've talked about that, Nikolai Ostapovich!" he added reproachfully.

"It's not only haulage he's warning us against. Did you understand what he meant by 'vulgar scepticism?' "

"Well, not exactly. Does he mean the usual sceptics?"
Nechayenko laughed.

"There are different kinds of sceptics," he said. "There are even sceptical enthusiasts. Or rather men who pass themselves off as enthusiasts. So we're going to fight the sceptics, Andrei!"

Andrei did not leave Nechayenko's office until an hour later. It was quite dark in the streets—the lights in the windows had gone out and the moon was hidden in the clouds. It seemed as if the rain could not make up its mind whether to come down or stay up. There was no wind to shake it out of the clouds or drive the clouds away and clear the sky.

Andrei went home. He walked at a leisurely pace. He had to think, to mull over slowly and calmly the events of the day, of which there were many. Sergo's telegram, for instance. It occupied his thoughts most of all. "So they know all about our affairs there, about every one of us. And if I come out against Rudin tomorrow at the Party meeting, they'll get to know it, too. But what if I keep silent?" he suddenly asked himself. "I daresay Rudin has already reported Zabara's record. And deceived Comrade Sergo. How can I keep silent? But why should I speak? I've done my part—told Nechayenko about it. Besides, they have their own Communists at the Red Partisan, they won't keep silent either." But he already felt the burden of responsibility for the neighbouring mine resting on his soul, and he realized that his telling Nechayenko about it in no way released him from it.

It occupied Andrei's mind all the next day. And an hour before the meeting he very nearly quarrelled with Victor.

That day's issue of the district newspaper was delivered at the hostel, and Victor, who was an avid reader of the paper these days, snatched it up eagerly, looked at it and pulled a wry face.

"There, look at that!" he shouted at Andrei. "You and Nechayenko think you're very clever. And here they've put our nose out of joint."

"Let's have a look," Andrei said quietly. He was shaving before the mirror.

Victor tossed the newspaper to him. The headline stood out: "Zabara Sets a New World Record!" Andrei had no need to read further. He calmly went on lathering his cheeks.

His calmness, however, infuriated Victor all the more.

"I'm fed up with it!" he shouted. "Why don't you give me a chance? You wait. I'll get it all off my chest at the meeting today."

"I shouldn't if I were you."

"I don't care a hang what you think! I've got my reputation to think of. You fellows don't worry about the mine—"

"Yes, we do."

"A fat lot you do!" Victor laughed harshly. "Letting the neighbours laugh at us."

"I'm not so sure about that. Maybe this record is making them laugh on the wrong side of their face!"

"What?" Victor queried in surprise. "Why should it?" He glanced at his friend, who went on shaving imperturbably as ever, then waved his hand in a hopeless gesture. "I can't make you out, Andrei!"

Indeed, he could not understand his friend. He thought him to be the same old Andrei, just as he was the same old Victor. But neither of the boys was what he had been a month before. Andrei might be said to be "growing by the hour." Many changes had already been wrought in him, and still others were taking place. This growth, however, proceeded naturally and continuously, and Andrei himself was unaware of it, as a youth is unaware that two more inches have been added to his stature and new masculine notes have come into his voice.

Andrei finished shaving and went out to wash. He always dressed up for the Party meeting as if it were some festive occasion. It was the same when he used to go to Komsomol meetings, and before that the Young Pioneer rallies. Perhaps it was the Pioneer rallies that started it.

After his conversation with Victor, Andrei definitely made up his mind to speak at the meeting.

Rudin turned up unexpectedly at the meeting. Andrei saw him taking a seat on the platform as Nechayenko was finishing his report. "Oh, I don't care!" Andrei thought with a frown.

Nechayenko made a good report, and the debates promised to be lively. The first to take the floor was Prokop Maximovich Lesnyak. His big burly body swayed slightly on the rickety little platform. He reported to the meeting that his section—the whole of it—was adopting the Stakhanov method. For this purpose it was decided, upon mature consideration, to do away with the restricted benches, leaving only four of them instead of eight, and introduce division of labour everywhere in the section. To ensure smooth working, the horse-putters and timber-pushers would likewise be paid on the progressive-scale piece-work system.

"And quite right, too!" he said. "Every man should have something to gain by it. Aren't the timber-pushers as good as any others?"

All that Prokop Maximovich was proposing had been threshed out with Andrei and discussed at the section's Party group and the Colliery Party Committee. Listening to the old man, Andrei nodded his head in silent approval.

"What about output?" Rudin suddenly interrupted Prokop. "Zabara has already given three hundred tons. Heard about it?"

"There is such a rumour," Prokop Maximovich answered non-committally.

"I can let you into a secret—that rumour is true!" laughed Rudin. "What are you people going to do about it?"

"We promise to double output on our section."

"On the whole section?" Rudin queried. "Well, well, we shall see."

He was in high spirits, and everyone noticed it. He smiled good-naturedly all the time, cracked jokes, interrupted the speakers with humorous remarks and questions, and warming to the subject, spoke at considerable length. There are people to whom the process of speaking is the most active and creative process of their lives. They implicitly believe in the omnipotence of the spoken word, even when there are no deeds or actions behind it. Speech-making to them is a business in itself. Rudin was one of these people. He was a good speaker and he liked speaking. He enjoyed beyond everything the sound of his own voice, rolling the words over in his mouth lusciously and articulating them in a loud, weighty clipped tone as if he were coining silver rubles. Meanwhile, the speaker he had interrupted would be shuffling unhappily on the platform, smiling uncomfortably and waiting until Rudin had had his say.

At last Andrei Voronko took the floor. He got up quickly, with an impatience that was foreign to him, and hurriedly crossed the hall, looking obviously nervous. Rudin smiled to him in a friendly way, then leaned over to Nechayenko and whispered something to him. The latter listened politely, while he cast nervous glances at Voronko. He felt uneasy on Andrei's account. How would he speak? Would he say anything about Zabara's "record?" Criticize Rudin? Nechayenko himself had for some time past felt a growing dissatisfaction with the Secretary of the Town Party Committee. He realized that sooner or later he would fall out with him. But on what question would they join issue? So far there were few facts to

justify a real fight, and personal likes or dislikes played no part in the matter.

Ascending the platform almost at a run, Andrei, oddly enough, recovered his composure as soon as he saw the hall before him. His comrades sat there. He knew every one of them. He saw Uncle Prokop smiling encouragement to him. He saw Lantsov sitting in the front row—Lantsov who had said: "The pony can't keep up now with the hewer." Andrei did not glance round at the chairman's table. He knew that Rudin was there. But then so was Nechayenko.

He rested both hands on the edge of the desk, thrust his head forward and began:

"Comrade Rudin here just now mentioned Zabara's record. I have something to say about that record, too."

Rudin turned his whole body round towards him with awakened interest.

"Zabara has stung everyone to the quick, I see!" he said with a pleased laugh. "Well, well!"

Andrei ignored the remark. He went on calmly:

"I know all about that record. I was down the Red Partisan yesterday. The record is a fact, but output has dropped, that's the trouble!" He smiled. "I'm not against records—I don't have to tell you that. It goes without saying! But what we should like is that the records should be honest."

"Why, is Zabara's record a dishonest one?" Rudin shouted jealously.

"I'm not speaking about Zabara!" Andrei retorted without looking at Rudin. "He's an honest coal-hewer. He did his job conscientiously. No one can deny that. But everything else that went on around him was false and wrong—"

"Sheer envy!" Rudin threw out with a scowl. "Shame! Shame!" and he shook his head deprecatingly for all to see. "Hadn't you better tell us about your work instead

of retailing gossip?" he added, and it was clear to everybody that Rudin was angry with Andrei in real earnest, although no one understood why.

Andrei was taken aback. Did his comrades really believe he had come out here merely because he envied Zabaraba? He started shuffling his feet uneasily. Beads of sweat broke out on his wide clear forehead.

"I see. You people here are getting a bit self-opinionated!" Rudin went on more calmly, his mood of exultant good humour gradually returning to him. "Think you can live off yesterday's fame? Got a grudge against your neighbours for beating you. Shame! Fie! You'd do better, Comrade Voronko, to tell the meeting how you think of organizing your own work. That would be more like it," he ended up on a conciliatory and even cordial note.

Andrei began nervously turning over the leaves of his note-book.

"I'll talk about that, too!" he muttered. "Comrade Lesnyak has reported on that. For my part, as Partorg of the section..." he floundered, and everyone felt uncomfortable on his account. "They've chased the lad up a tree!" Prokop Maximovich thought with chagrin and was about to go to his rescue, when Andrei, with a sudden resolute movement, thrust the note-book aside and said in a low but firm voice: "No, I'll first say what I wanted to say, and leave it for you to judge."

"Say whatever you think necessary, Comrade Voronko," Nechayenko said in a loud voice. "You're at a Party meeting."

"Quite right!" Rudin flung in. "And don't forget it's a Party meeting, not a market-place." He expected the quip to raise a ripple of amusement in the hall, but it caused a rumble of indignation. Someone shouted out:

"Why don't you let the man have his say? Throwing him off all the time!"

"That's all right," Andrei said. "It'll take more than that to throw me off."

"Go ahead, Andrei, speak."

And Andrei began telling how, by fair means or foul, Zabara's record was "organized," how it had upset existing arrangements and thrown the mine out of gear, and how that "record" was finally achieved at the cost of non-fulfilment of the daily output.

"And that was all done on the orders of Comrade Rudin. Comrade Rudin acted for the whole staff—he was colliery manager and chief engineer. They say he acted as dispatcher, too, and haulage chief. Took charge of the tubs—gave directions where each one was to go. . . ."

There was laughter in the hall. It sounded offensive in Rudin's ears, disrespectful, and he resented it even more than he did Voronko's words.

"Now then, you, careful what you say!" he shouted, losing control over himself. "Don't you think you're a bit young to be teaching me? You haven't been so long in the Party yourself—"

"Criticism in the Party is not regulated by the term of membership," Nechayenko coolly interjected, and the Communists laughed again.

"This isn't criticism! It's demagoguery, insolence, hooliganism!" Rudin shouted, jumping up, and he immediately regretted his unguarded remark. A murmur ran through the hall like the mutterings of a storm, and Rudin caught the menacing note in it.

* 24 *

Rudin was annoyed with himself. Probably more annoyed than he had ever been in his life. He motored straight to the T.P.C. after the Party meeting at the Steep Maria and passed into his office with a curt order to his secretary that he was not to be disturbed.

"And bring me some tea!" he shouted back from the door-way. "Make it strong!" He went in and locked the door.

He realized clearly that he had made a mistake at the Steep Maria. "Damn it!" he thought wryly. "What a fool I made of myself!" As is often the case, the most trivial details impinged themselves most painfully up on his mind, making him burn with shame. "I believe I even squeaked..." he winced at the memory. "Hysterical old woman!" He crushed his cigarette out in the ash tray and instantly lit another, puffing at it greedily. He had begun to smoke a lot lately, confound it! Felt sick in the mornings, with that horrible taste of sour metal in the mouth. "I'm going to pieces lately—heart, nerves," he brooded, pacing up and down the room. "Going to pieces, that's my trouble. That accounts for the mistakes. And now suppression of criticism—that's about the limit!"

Yes, it was a mistake. And all that had preceded it was a mistake too, a whole chain of errors. Rudin did not dismiss them airily, as he had done only yesterday, but tracked them down, one by one, with a sort of malicious glee and placed them all in a row. "But my biggest mistake," it suddenly struck him, "was coming to the Donbas at all!"

There was a timid knock at the door—more like someone scratching at it than knocking.

"Who's it now!" Rudin shouted testily.

It was the secretary with the tea. She sidled in nervously and placed the glass on the table. She could see that her chief was in a bad humour today. Nevertheless, as she was backing out, she murmured soothingly:

"Have some tea, Comrade Semyon. It's strong, the way you like it!"

Rudin thawed somewhat. He liked to hear himself called "Comrade Semyon." It was somehow reminiscent of underground Party work with its suggestion of years of

secret hiding and secret rendezvous, political prisons, even penal servitude.

Semyon Rudin had never been an underground worker. True, in 1919 he had some distant connection with the Komsomol underground organization in Odessa—he had some school friends whom he suspected of being connected with the Komsomol and he rendered them some services. Had it not been for his father he would doubtlessly have been drawn into the underground organization. Afterwards he bitterly regretted that he had not. He did not join the Komsomol until 1921.

Rudin was not his real name either. His real name, no less sonorous than the one he had borrowed from Turgenev, was odious to him. It was the name of his father, a big corn merchant, a name that had loomed large on the commercial sign-boards of Odessa right up to the end of the NEP period. Rudin broke completely with his family at the time he joined the Komsomol. He had once hated his corn-chandler father with an agonizing hatred for the black mark that marred his record. Today his father was a humble clerk in a cooperative. Rudin had broken off relations with him, and he rarely wrote to his mother.

He had arrived in the Donbas five years before. Up to then he had worked in the centre, in the People's Commissariats (now Ministries) in close proximity with big men, mostly in the capacity of assistant, executive or head secretary. One day he got tired of it. He suddenly discovered that his youth had passed without his having attained anything. It frightened him. Was this to go on for the rest of his life? To sit eternally in offices, write up reports and turn down visitors? He asked for and obtained a transfer "to the country." He chose the Donbas. He pictured it as an El Dorado of unlimited opportunities. Here was where he'd let himself go, show the stuff he was made of! He even thought he was performing a

heroic deed by leaving the centre, and was very proud of his valour.

He was sent out on an administrative job. While still in the train on his way out he cast about his mind what he would do first. Town planning? Housing affairs? No, that was not for Rudin, no chance to make a great splash. No, what he needed was something that would make everyone sit up, he needed a "brilliant idea," and that happy idea came to him itself on his very first evening at the mine, when he was sitting in the front garden, drinking tea with the old pump operator with whom he had taken temporary lodgings.

Roses were blooming in the little garden. Rudin had never imagined roses growing in a colliery settlement, and he gazed at them with tender emotion. It was then that he had his brain wave—roses! Yes, roses at the mine—that's what he would do! Roses would make his fame! He'd put the whole district on its head, stand on his own if need be, but he'd have roses growing at the mine. Tulips, too, and mallows, and asters in the autumn. And not only in the front gardens, where they were now blooming shyly, but at the mine itself. At the check-gate. In the office yard. Outside the stint room and the lamp-cabin.

He was not mistaken about the sensation it would create. Flowers became an adornment of the miners' lives. There was something touching about those flower beds round the waste pile. Rudin became the idol of all the housewives. Hundreds of them, with spades on their shoulders, came to the florist's for seedlings, and breaking up into groups, planted them on the squares and along the streets. The neighbouring districts took a leaf out of Rudin's book. Press reporters and photographers arrived. One rhapsodical journalist even called Rudin the "miners' Michurin." His private office was now constantly

crowded with florists, agriculturists and municipal-department men.

One day a little old man called on Rudin with various bundles and packages. He modestly confessed to Rudin that he had been "dabbling in this flower business" for many years, and although his garden was a tiny affair, he had succeeded in raising tulips of the most extraordinary colours, and was now anxious to consult such a knowledgeable and experienced man as Rudin.

The poor old fellow expected to find a kindred spirit in Rudin, but he was sadly mistaken. Rudin quickly got rid of him, pushing him on to the public service department, and the little old gentleman, ruefully collecting his bundles and packages, went away feeling rather hurt that the "knowledgeable man" had refused to share his learning and secrets with him, a self-taught florist and flower-lover. It never entered his mind that Rudin did not know a thing about floriculture and that he was as indifferent to flowers as he was to people. There was only one man he loved, and that man was Semyon Rudin.

There was no end of journalists, excursionists and delegates all the summer. Then the excitement died down. Not because the autumn night frosts had killed off the last of the asters, but because all the mines now had flowers of their own.

Ah, well! Rudin did not take it ill. He was fed up with the whole thing anyway. He was now awaiting his reward. Every morning and every evening he expected a telegram or a phone call, appointing him to a new job. He turned over in his mind the various probabilities, which offers he would accept and which he would not. The thing was not to let himself go cheap. But he sat waiting in vain.

Yes, life was a failure! He had made several more attempts after that to cut a dash, but only put his foot in it. Thus, during the bitter-cold winter of 1932-33, he hit on

the idea of organizing Sunday "spurt efforts" to eliminate the "bottle-neck."

"Let us sacrifice our free days for the benefit of our mine!" he clamoured at the Party plenum. "We'll all go down into the pit! Set an example! Do some coal-hewing. I'll be the first to go!" he boomed, kindling everyone, himself included, with his fiery speech.

The next Sunday a small army sallied forth to the mine—the staff members of the T.P.C. and the Town Soviet, the newspaper editor, the district prosecutor, doctors from the Health Department, the manager of the State Bank local branch, the director of the brewery—with Rudin at its head, clad in a brand-new miner's outfit with rubber jackboots, helmet and gift lamp engraved with his name. It looked very picturesque on the surface, with the photographers bustling around, but down in the pit it proved to be absurd and ludicrous. It was one thing to heave coal or firewood at a Subbotnik, to pave roads or plant trees—no special qualifications were needed, good will was sufficient—but it was quite another matter to hew coal at the working face. This was not brought home to Rudin until he took the pneumatic hammer into his hands.

"Just show me how the thing works, I'll manage myself," he said to the hewer in a cheery if somewhat uncertain, tone. He was shown. He tried it. It wouldn't work. He tried again. The miners were amused. He barely managed to hew a tubful of coal during the whole shift. The miners solemnly chalked on the tub: "Comrade Rudin's output." He never got to know whether they meant it seriously or mockingly. He did not go to the pit the next Sunday.

He soon dropped the idea altogether, quietened down and a sense of defeat beset him. He had a distaste for technics, and the daily round of T.P.C. work afforded him neither pleasure nor interest. He still clamoured, and waxed excited by force of habit, and delivered ardent

speeches, but this was now ash and not fire. Rudin was extinguished.

No, he did not find his El Dorado in the Donbas. He had been five years there now, and all those five years he had shifted from place to place without striking root anywhere. It was not an uphill movement, but a trudging from one little hillock to another. Everyone was overtaking him. Other secretaries were making the grade. They did not strive after fame—it came to them. “Why is it?” he thought enviously. “Why is it that I get all the rotten luck?” He couldn’t understand, naturally, that the answer to this question lay within himself, that no one was to blame but himself, that Party work could not be done with snobbish hands, that one could not work with people unless one loved them and took their interests to heart. Neither did he realize that he had fallen behind the times as well as behind his neighbours, that he was holding his post precariously, by mere chance, like the last leaf on a tree—brown, shrivelled and dead—lingering until the first gust of wind.

He did not realize that, and kept waiting with dreary hope for the “brilliant idea” that was bound to come to him in the end, bringing salvation and fame. But when that idea came to him in the shape of Andrei Voronko in the stint room of the Steep Maria, he had failed to notice it.

He could not forgive himself. “Fancy me, with my intuition, letting such a chance slip by!” he thought. And when Abrosimov nevertheless set the record and Rudin got to hear about it, he wasn’t at all glad—he was furious. “What? Without me?” That was him all over. To him, the event at the Steep Maria on the night of September 1st, was not the labour exploit of a miner, but a cunning intrigue against him, Rudin, and behind the mounds of extracted coal he saw not Abrosimov and Voronko, but the hand of Zhuravlyov and Nechayenko. “A-ah!” he stormed. ‘Making a career behind my back? Plotting against

me?" That was the only construction he could put on Zhuravlyov's and Nechayenko's part in the affair.

He had stigmatized Abrosimov's record as "eye-wash," "window-dressing." He had even wanted to form a committee of investigation. But then *Pravda* had arrived with the news of Stakhanov's record, and Rudin realized that he had put his foot in it again. However, he did not even apologize to Abrosimov—it never occurred to him. He simply pretended that nothing had happened, and began frantically casting about for ways of making up for lost time, trying, as it were, to jump on a train he had very nearly missed. And, like every man who is behindhand, he began fussing about and making more noise than anybody else.

Even he now sensed that something very big was afoot in the Donbas coal-fields. He said to himself: Now's your chance! Don't be caught napping! How much did Stakhanov cut? A hundred and two tons? In that case we've got to give 200! 300! 500! These figures whirled in his head, and eclipsed all else. He now dashed about the district in his little car, organizing new records—he called them "my bomb-shells"—going without sleep and food, talking himself hoarse, but feeling splendid. He was gay as a lark, felt years younger; his old energy, and with it, his old hopes, returned. The sceptic became an enthusiast. When Zabara cut 300 tons of coal Rudin was elated, more so than Zabara himself, more than the photographers and reporters he had dragged out with him to the mine.

And now this speech of Andrei Voronko's at the Party meeting. Again Voronko! Again Nechayenko!

"Yes, it's a bad business! It'll come to the ears of the Regional Committee. Maybe the Central Committee, too. I believe there were newspapermen at the meeting. Fancy losing my temper! Yes, a nasty business. Must get out of the mess somehow before it's too late. But how? How?

How?" his thoughts ran on confusedly, while his glance wandered about the room, lingering on the telephones and the bell button. But who could he phone? Who could he ring for? Who could help him?

Mechanically he pressed the button.

"Is Vasili Sergeyeovich in his office?" he hoarsely inquired of the secretary when she answered the bell.

"Yes. He has just come in. Shall I call him?"

"No," Rudin said after a moment's thought.

He regretted having said it the minute the secretary was gone. Jumping up, he strode swiftly out of his office, crossed the ante-room and passed into Zhuravlyov's private office.

Zhuravlyov was by himself. Rudin's eyes drilled him. "I wonder whether he knows what took place at the Steep Maria?" he thought. Zhuravlyov's face revealed no sign if he did. He rose to meet Rudin, polite and cold-eyed, as usual. "With other people his face looks different!" Rudin thought with a jealous pang. He had never bothered to study Zhuravlyov's face before. There was no friendship between them. Rudin had made no friends here. "There can only be friendship among equals!" he had said to himself. And who could be Rudin's equal here? Just now he regretted that lack of friendship. He did not know how to break the ice. A frank talk was out of the question, anyway. He felt rather uncomfortable, but Zhuravlyov maintained an impassive silence.

"Well, well. Nice goings on in our organization," Rudin said, lowering himself into an arm-chair. He tried to make his voice sound casual and natural, and even attempted a laugh, but nothing came of it, for Rudin's heart was too full of rancour. "Nice goings on, I must say."

"What goings on?" Zhuravlyov asked quietly.

"Why, they organized a regular obstruction against me at the Steep Maria today. Made no bones about it."

"I heard about the meeting."

"Oh, you did?" Rudin looked up suspiciously. "Quick information, yours!" he sneered.

Zhuravlyov said nothing.

"Well, and what do you think about it?"

"About what?"

"About what happened at the meeting?" Rudin cried impatiently.

Zhuravlyov shrugged.

"Well, you can't stop a man criticizing."

"Yes, but the way he spoke!"

"I was told he spoke well," Zhuravlyov could not help smiling.

"Who told you that? Nechayenko? Why, he's the biggest mischief-maker and demagogue in the district. He should have been kicked out long ago."

Zhuravlyov merely smiled with the corners of his mouth, as much as to say: "You just try!" And with a sudden sharp pang Rudin felt all the agony of his impotence and isolation. He was not yet ready to give in, though.

"Demagogy!" he growled. "But they've got hold of the wrong man. We know that game! It won't work! People know Rudin! Who's going to believe that old wives' gossip?"

"But it isn't gossip!" Zhuravlyov uttered quietly. "It's just what really happened at the Red Partisan."

"So you've been there, too?"

"No. People came here and told me about it. A thing like that can't be hidden."

"Who told you?" Rudin sprang to his feet. "Who are those talebearers? I demand their names!"

"There's no need to go off the deep end!" Zhuravlyov checked him. "They were quite ordinary people. Communists. I don't see why you should have it in for Voronko, Semyon Petrovich!" he smiled. "If it wasn't Voronko, it would have been someone else. You can't hide a thing like this," he repeated.

"Ah, so that's what it is?" Rudin shouted. "You're at one with them, against me?" His self-control deserted him again. "My prestige is a fly in your ointment. Eh? Standing in your way, am I?"

Zhuravlyov made a grimace of disgust.

"The words you use—'I,' 'me,' 'my!'"

"Tell me straight! Don't fence!"

"I'm not fencing!" Zhuravlyov said with a sudden frown, getting up. "If you want my opinion, you can have it. Voronko is right. I see nothing wrong in his speech. And Nechayenko is right, too. He did the right thing not to stop him. And you're wrong all round. You behaved wrong at the meeting, not like a member of the Party."

He uttered this calmly and judicially, without once raising his voice, as though he were pronouncing a verdict. The effect on Rudin of that low, dispassionate voice was stronger than the most earnest of speeches. He suddenly perceived all that Zhuravlyov stood for and gave such weight to his words—the whole vast authority of the Party at his back. Rudin wilted and sank back into his chair.

"Possibly.... Of course...." he muttered. "A mistake. I admit it. Lost my temper there, at the Steep Maria. Too bad, of course! But try to imagine yourself in my place." He half-rose in his chair, looked up at Zhuravlyov irresolutely, and realized that the latter could never imagine himself in Rudin's place, that he had no sympathy for Rudin, and that it was no use expecting any from him.

* 25 *

Early in the morning of November 6, 1935 a large delegation of Donets coal miners and metal workers arrived in the capital for the October holidays on the invitation of the Moscow Soviet. The delegation included Alexei Stakhanov, and Dyukanov, and Konstantin Petrov, the

Partorg of the Central Irmino Colliery, and many other Donbas celebrities. Our heroes, Andrei Voronko and Victor Abrosimov, were there too.

Important changes had lately taken place in the life of Andrei Voronko. Soon after the meeting at which he had criticized Rudin, a special commission of the Regional Party Committee, accompanied by an instructor of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Ukraine, came down to investigate. The investigation was brief and brought to light many things of which Voronko did not have the remotest idea. Rudin was relieved of his post, and he immediately left the district. Vasili Sergeyevich Zhuravlyov was elected First Secretary of the Town Party Committee, and Nechayenko, Second Secretary. Nechayenko was given a solemn promise that within a year—this time for certain!—he would be given leave to continue his education. The duties of Secretary of the Colliery Party Committee at the Steep Maria were temporarily entrusted to Andrei.

He accepted the responsibility—"the Party's trust is a thing to be proud of, son," Uncle Prokop had said to him with stern affection at the meeting—but so far he did not feel himself to be a real Party Secretary, as Nechayenko had been. Besides, he had not been endorsed by the Central Committee as Partorg, and was convinced that he wouldn't be. He was much too young and inexperienced. However, he took to Party work, which attracted him by its most alluring side—work among the people.

During the journey, Andrei was involuntarily drawn to Petrov, as Victor was to Stakhanov. The talk in Stakhanov's compartment was real coal-hewer's talk—they challenged one another to competition, compared notes on technique and swore at the pit deputies and haulage arrangements. Andrei, for his part, carefully pumped the famous Partorg, and Petrov willingly answered all his questions about his methods of work. In some indefinable

way Petrov resembled Nechayenko. He was just as young, gay and noisy—the same “good fellow.” It was not long before all the delegation members were calling him Kostya (short for Konstantin), and without Kostya no one did a thing. He was always the centre of a crowd.

As is usually the case, the first half of the journey was spent in talk about what they had just left behind—the Donbas, home, miners’ affairs. Somewhere after Kursk the conversation turned on things that lay ahead—it was all about Moscow. Many, like Andrei and Victor, were travelling to Moscow for the first time, and each one had his own expectations in regard to Moscow. The young people were eager for the theatres and entertainments, the elderly planned what presents they would buy for their families. All were agreed, however, that their first visit would be to the Red Square and Lenin in the Mausoleum, and, if possible, they would go sightseeing in the Kremlin.

They arrived in Moscow early in the morning when the city lay shrouded in mist. Only the house-tops adjoining the station and the white wisps of smoke from their chimneys were visible. There was the usual smell of coal about the railway station, the most agreeable of smells to our delegates.

“Well, now!” Victor cried joyfully, jumping to the platform. “It smells of coal!”

Despite the early hour, the Donbas guests were met at the station by their hosts, the Moscow Stakhanovites, and driven to the Oktyabrskaya Hotel, where all the workers’ delegations put up. The hotel lobby was crowded with delegates, reporters, photographers, and newsreel men. The arrival of the Donbas miners created a stir among them.

“Where is Stakhanov? Which one?”

Introductions were quickly made. Many of the names were familiar to Andrei. The fame of these workers had spread throughout the land. Busygin was there too—a short lean man, quite unlike a forgerman, Faustov, the

weavers Dusya and Marusya Vinogradova. Everyone thought the Vinogradovas to be sisters, although they were only friends and "rivals." However, the "Vinogradova sisters" was the name the people gave them, and there was nothing they could do about it.

The Leningrad guests, too, arrived by the morning train. There was quite a crowd of them, and to Andrei there was something in them that set them apart from the rest of the guests.

"Intellectuals!" Victor remarked with a tinge of envy, and decided there and then that he would buy a pull-over and wear it instead of a waistcoat, which, by the way, he had only put on for this trip to Moscow.

Delegates kept arriving—people from the Urals, Siberia, Arkhangelsk, Baku—the whole advance guard of the Soviet working class seemed to have mustered here in the Oktyabrskaya Hotel for some important review.

Andrei and Victor were eager to see the city. After a hasty breakfast, they went down into the lobby where all their comrades stood dressed and ready to set out. They all went out together, straight to Red Square, as though by pre-concerted arrangement.

Victor, with a thrill of delight, recognized the various buildings en route which he had previously seen only in films, photographs and picture postcards. It was like meeting old friends, and he proudly uttered their names—the Bolshoi Theatre, T.U. House, Hotel Moskva, Sovnarkom House, Okhotni Ryad Metro Station, Museum of the Revolution. . . .

And here was Red Square. Everyone fell silent. The group stepped on to the block paving and halted for a minute, as though breasting a hill. The magnificent sweep of square took one's breath away.

It was exactly how Andrei pictured Red Square to himself in the silence of his pit working—spacious, austere and majestic. The Kremlin towers. The Mausoleum.

The sentries, like carved stone figures. The fir trees feathered with hoar-frost. He had always pictured them so. The Kremlin wall. The grey buildings. And the flag fluttering in the breeze over the dome of the Central Executive Committee. The summit of the world. . . .

And now Andrei and his comrades were standing on that summit as if it were the most natural thing in the world for them to be there. Victor was smiling. Feathery snow-flakes hovered in the air. Stakhanov was saying something to Dyukanov. Both wore smart well-cut overcoats. One would never take them for miners.

But it was miners standing there on Red Square, at the summit of the world! What a long, long way they had climbed to this eminence from out the bowels of the earth, from their sunless levels 640, 710, 830! There had been a time when, cooped up underground, they had not seen the light of day, when they knew no other greeting but the shout of the overseer, no other name but "dirty mugs," no other joys but those of the pot-house. No labour had been more humiliating and galling than that of the miner, no life more cheerless than life spent practically on all fours. Now the miners were standing on Red Square as if it were natural for them to be standing there, for they were the honoured guests of Moscow. Facing them was the Kremlin. Had Uncle Onisim been in Andrei's place he would have felt it far more deeply than these young men! Andrei recalled the old man's parting words—he had come to see them off at the station.

"Don't forget, Andrei, when you meet Stalin give him the regards of our Steep Maria."

"Oh, Uncle Onisim! As if I'll meet him!" Andrei had smiled.

"Why not? You're going to Moscow, aren't you?"

"Y-e-s. . . ." someone next to Andrei murmured longingly. "Wouldn't it be grand, boys, to see the inside of the Kremlin?"

"Yes, it's interesting! Historical place."

"A great place."

"Imagine us all in the Kremlin!" Victor said dreamily. "Walking through the courtyard. And suddenly Comrade Stalin steps out. Why not?" he cried, catching the amused smiles of his comrades.

"I've been in the Kremlin," a miner delegate from Gorlovka said in a quiet voice. He was a taciturn elderly man, whom Andrei had hardly noticed in the train. Everyone looked round.

"You!" Victor said incredulously. "When was that?"

"Exactly two and a half years ago."

"An excursion, I suppose?"

"No," the man answered with simple dignity. "I visited Stalin."

"Visited Stalin?!"

"Yes," the miner coolly confirmed, and related how, in the spring of 1933, the Central Committee had invited a group of old Donets miners and engineers to Moscow for consultation in connection with a draft resolution concerning the Donbas.

"Just a minute!" Victor excitedly interrupted him. "Wasn't it the resolution of 1933 about the anti-mechanizers?"

"It was."

"Why, I know that resolution perfectly well!" Victor cried elatedly. "I was at the shock-workers' rally at the time. Don't you remember, Andrei?" he swung round to his friend and then back again to the Gorlovka miner. "So it was you who drafted that resolution?"

"Not me, of course," the latter smiled. "We miners did give our advice, that much I admit."

"Yes," Dyukanov said thoughtfully. "You're lucky, Granddad!"

"I know I am," the Gorlovka miner answered quietly.

Coming back from Red Square, someone—it may have been Victor—suggested:

“I say, boys, let’s write a greeting to Comrade Stalin.”

The idea appealed to everyone. Right there, in the street, they huddled round Alexei Stakhanov, and began composing a message of greeting. Stakhanov rested his note-book against the wall of a grey house and wrote it down. This was how it was worded: “Our greetings to all the working people of the Soviet Union on the 18th anniversary of the Great Revolution! We, the invited guests of Moscow’s workers, convey through the *Pravda* our ardent greetings to our beloved Stalin.”

Then they all signed it in turn. Andrei, as he put his name, thought:

“Tomorrow, perhaps, I will see him at the parade.”

But Andrei saw Stalin that evening, on his first day in Moscow. It happened so unexpectedly and simply that Andrei could hardly believe it. That evening the Stakhanovites were invited to the Celebration Meeting in the Bolshoi Theatre. Stalin appeared in the presidium. Victor was the first to notice him.

“Look, look!” he whispered to Andrei, then he jumped up, raised his hands high above his head and shouted: “Hurrah!”

The cheer was immediately caught up by the rest of the hall. It swept through the hall in thunderous gusts, and Andrei cheered with happy abandon along with the rest, seeing nothing but that dear familiar face, those kind attentive eyes.

Moscow gave her guests a warm welcome. She presented herself to them in all her ancient but ever-youthful beauty, and gave unstintingly from the wealth of her affection. The Stakhanovites even felt somewhat embarrassed by the attention and honours accorded them. They

shyly received the greetings of the Moscovites and were overwhelmed by the lavish gifts of flowers. But it was good to feel that all this hospitality in the capital of the country was for a working man. The miners, of course, were singled out for special honours—either because the people had already named the new movement after a miner, or because the miner's profession seemed the most romantic and even heroic to the Moscovites. For Moscow was fond of heroes—airmen, Arctic explorers, parachutists, frontier guards.

Moscow won the hearts of our boys. They liked everything there—the people, the streets, the factories, the theatres and the new Metro stations.

"Palaces!" Victor cried delightedly. "You'd never say it was underground. If only our mines were like that, eh!"

"We'll have mines like palaces, too," Andrei said.

"Nonsense! It's impossible! There isn't any coal in the Metro, that's why it's so clean."

But Andrei said doggedly:

"I tell you we'll have palaces!"

The boys visited the Kremlin after all. And there, as everywhere else in Moscow, the doors were flung open to them. One thing alone Victor regretted—that they had so little time. He counted the minutes like a miser. He was last to go to sleep and first to wake up. And all his waking hours he lamented the fact that he would not have time to see all the sights.

He did not even wish to meet Dasha, so as not to waste precious time.

"What can she show us in Moscow?" he grumbled. "Just a waste of time."

However, Andrei insisted on their meeting Dasha. Uncle Prokop would never forgive them if they didn't. "And Dasha wouldn't forgive me either!" he thought sably.

They met the next morning outside the Telegraph Office, and promptly went to buy Victor a pull-over. Dasha was delighted to see them and did not conceal it. In the department store they went to, she kept up a gay chatter with the salesgirls and selected Victor's pull-over herself. Suddenly she asked:

"Did you send presents home?"

"Who to?"

"Well, to your folks—in Chibiryaki."

The idea appealed to Victor. The boys decided to buy the articles right away and send them off by parcel post.

"Won't they be surprised to get it from Moscow?" Victor said, delighted as a child.

Andrei, following Dasha up and down the endless staircases, pondered agonizingly whether it would not be indelicate if he made Dasha a gift, whether she would be offended or not. And what should he buy her? Perfume, a hand-bag, a silk kerchief? But these, in Andrei's opinion, did not suit Dasha. Suddenly making up his mind, he bought her a dainty brief-case and timidly proffered it to her.

"This is for you."

Dasha was surprised.

"Oh, you shouldn't, Andrei!"

But the gift pleased her. She thanked him. Victor, not to be outdone, bought her a present too—some brooch or other. Andrei saw her flush with pleasure. She pinned the brooch to her blouse and kept admiring it. Andrei knew that she would wear it always now.

There was another meeting in Moscow which impressed itself on the boys' minds, and affected them, as usual, in different ways. Together with other delegates they received an invitation from Nikita Izotov. He was a Moscovite now, studying at the Industrial Academy, but he entertained his countrymen in Donbas fashion—with pickled cabbage, pickled apples, pickled cucumbers, pimentos

and beer served collier-fashion, in a huge jug. It was warm and cozy in the flat, but it seemed to Andrei that Nikita Izotov felt cramped here, as he felt in the pit working. He was a big generously-built man and Andrei eyed him with involuntary awe. "Studying at the Academy," he thought. "A miner, too, like us. And not a youngster."

"Don't you find it hard, studying, Nikita Alexeyevich?" one of the company asked.

"Well, yes—cutting coal was easier!" Izotov answered, laughing. Then he glanced round the company, sighed and added: "But we've got to learn! Especially you boys, take my advice."

Victor looked at him in surprise. A giant like that sitting at a school desk! Why, if he took up the pneumatic hammer, he'd beat everyone! And here he was studying.

Victor thoughtfully sipped at his beer glass. "Maybe it's the right thing now for us miners?" it flashed across his mind.

Meanwhile, the day of departure was drawing near. Railway tickets had already been reserved! The delegates, however, were loath to leave this hospitable city.

Suddenly arrangements for the delegations' departure were cancelled. All were detained—the delegates from the Donbas, from Leningrad and from Baku. On the other hand, more and more Stakhanovites kept arriving in Moscow. As many as three thousand had already assembled. There was a feeling of something big and important in the air.

In the evening there was a knock on Andrei's door.

"Come in!" said Voronko, thinking it was a journalist or photographer. Their own company generally came in without knocking.

A man in military uniform came into the room. He saluted Andrei.

"Are you Andrei Pavlovich Voronko?" he asked.

"I am."

The military man saluted again. Then he said:

"Andrei Pavlovich, Comrade Stalin wants to see you. The car is at the door."

* 26 *

Andrei was actually in the Kremlin. Soon, in another moment, perhaps, he would see Stalin. That moment came sooner even than he wished—Andrei was not prepared for it yet. But then he would hardly have been prepared for this meeting if he had sat here in the waiting-room the whole day long.

"Come in!" the secretary said for the second time, holding open the door.

Stalin crossed the room towards Andrei with slow unhurried steps. In his left hand he held a pipe. His right was extended in a gesture of greeting.

Andrei stepped across the threshold, and stood rooted to the spot.

Coming to himself with a start, he quickly took several steps towards Stalin. They met in the middle of the room.

Stalin, of course, perfectly understood the young miner's state of mind and sensed his agitation. A man not so great, less tactful than Stalin would have tried to put Andrei at his ease by smiling to him with exaggerated affability, patting him on the shoulder and perhaps putting his arm round the miner with easy familiarity and drawing him to the table, thus throwing him into utter confusion.

But Stalin simply held his hand out to Andrei—held it out almost without a smile, as if they had met before,

as if Andrei dropped in here every day and there was nothing unusual in the fact that he was here today.

"Good evening, Comrade Voronko!" Stalin said in a quiet friendly tone.

Andrei carefully pressed the proffered hand with a thrill of joy. He felt at that moment that Victor, and Prokop Maximovich and the Old Man, and Uncle Onisim, and Mitya Zakorko, and Dasha, and all the Communists, all the miners, all the people of the Steep Maria were pressing Stalin's hand together with him. It was in their name that he, Andrei Voronko, the Party Secretary of the Steep Maria, was shaking the hand of the General Secretary of the Bolshevik Party. It was in their name that he stood here, in Stalin's presence. He was merely their delegate. It was no mistake—he was here in the great man's private office with good right.

And he calmed down.

He noticed for the first time that he was standing in a big bare-looking room panelled in light wood. Stalin was regarding him with interest, with that kindly interest which only a man who loves his fellow men is capable of expressing. And Andrei trustfully and unflinchingly looked Stalin straight in the face.

A dear, familiar face. It was like and yet unlike the portraits; it looked at once older and more youthful; it was kinder, much kinder than on the portraits; it was simpler, more endearing. Stalin looked at him with interest, but was in no hurry to ask questions. He was giving Andrei time to compose himself. They were still standing in the middle of the room.

And then Andrei himself boldly opened the conversation. His first question was one which Uncle Prokop, Uncle Onisim or Sergei Ocheretin would have asked in his place.

"How is your health, Joseph Vissarionovich?" His voice shook with genuine emotion, and Stalin heard it.

"Splendid," he answered. "Thanks. And yours?" He motioned Andrei to an arm-chair with a smooth leisurely gesture.

"You may smoke," he added with a smile when Andrei was seated, and moved a box of cigarettes up to the visitor. Andrei took a cigarette, but forgot to light it and began rolling it between his fingers.

"Is this your first visit to Moscow?" Stalin asked, lighting his pipe.

"Yes."

"Do you like Moscow?"

"Oh!" was all Andrei could say.

"Were you well received in Moscow?"

"Beyond our expectations, Joseph Vissarionovich!"

"Why 'beyond expectations'?" Stalin smiled. "Our people in the capital have a great respect for miners."

"We shall never forget it, Comrade Stalin," Andrei answered firmly.

Stalin got his pipe going and sat down, not behind his desk, but in the other arm-chair, facing Andrei.

"I have invited you, Comrade Voronko," he said, leaning over towards his interlocutor, "because I want to consult you on one or two matters."

"Consult me?" Andrei echoed. The word "consult" almost startled him for the moment.

"Exactly. You are one of the pioneers of the Stakhanov movement, are you not? And Stakhanovites are a new special type of men."

"But what advice can I give you?" Andrei all but cried. "Why, I . . . I'm groping in the dark myself. Even as a Party worker I'm young and inexperienced." He looked at Stalin pleadingly. "Good God, there's some misunderstanding! They've called the wrong man! Send me away, for heaven's sake, don't waste your precious time."

Stalin calmly watched the play of emotions on his visitor's face, then leaned over to him still closer.

"Tell me please how this splendid movement came into being at your mine," he asked. "The whole history of the record."

Andrei drew a breath of relief.

"Oh, that—by all means," he said with alacrity. "Certainly."

He really thought it would be quite easy. The only difficulty was where to begin from, and make it as short as possible.

Stalin waited patiently.

"It was like this. . ." Andrei began somewhat hesitantly. "The thing started with the hewers feeling cramped at the coal-face." He halted, wondering whether he ought to explain to Comrade Stalin the "benching" system of coal-mining. On second thought he decided that Stalin knew everything without being told.

He went on with his story of how this gave rise to the idea of scrapping the old system and organizing division of labour, of how the Party organization at the colliery supported the idea but gave only one wall for the first trial, how Comrade Victor Fyodorovich Abrosimov first attempted this record since he was the strongest hewer at the mine, and how an hour before the shift started they got to know of Comrade Stakhanov's record, which only fired them all the more, and made them eager to beat Stakhanov's record, and it actually was beaten by Abrosimov and afterwards by many other miners of the Steep Maria. . . .

"Including myself," he added shyly. "But not by much. . . ."

Stalin was listening very attentively, as though every word of Andrei's was precious to him and told him more than it did the speaker. When Andrei had finished, however, he shook his head slowly, and Andrei saw that Stalin was dissatisfied with his story.

"That's all!" the miner said in a drooping voice.

"Is it?" Stalin queried with a smile, and shook his head again—reproachfully, as it seemed to Andrei. "Why don't you tell me the whole truth, Comrade Voronko?" Stalin suddenly asked in a tone of gentle rebuke. "Don't you trust me?"

Andrei caught his breath and stared at Stalin with a startled look. His pale eye-lashes blinked rapidly. "In what way have I deceived you, Comrade Stalin? How could I? You can't mean it!" he mentally addressed Stalin.

"Why didn't you tell me, for instance," Stalin said, "that your proposal to work the new way was furiously opposed by the mine administration? It was, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"And the Secretary of the Town Committee—what's his name?—Rudin, I believe?—he even accused you of being a wrecker and called Abrosimov's record eye-wash. Was that so?"

"But we've already . . . er . . . kicked Rudin out," Andrei said with sudden resolution.

"And quite right, too," Stalin nodded. His face, for the first time during the interview, grew hard. "It's high time that all these Rudins . . . these humbugs . . . these snobs and ignoramuses . . . were kicked out of all their posts!" he said disgustedly. "High time. The remarkable thing about the Stakhanov movement is that it has helped the Party in this, too. But the Rudins were not the only people to stand in your path. Didn't you meet with opposition among the workers themselves?"

"Why, yes . . . we did . . ." Andrei admitted quietly.

"There, you see. There were people who were afraid the Stakhanovite innovations would affect their earnings. Isn't that so?"

"Yes."

"And I even heard there was a pit deputy who tampered with the air-pressure duct when you were attempting the record."

"You know that, too?" Andrei gasped, blushing.

"As you see," Stalin smiled despite himself. "Why didn't you tell me this at once, Comrade Voronko?"

Yes, why hadn't he? Why had he decided that one could only come into the great man's room with accounts of victories won? Why had he come here boasting? This was not a place to boast in. Here the truth was required, the whole truth. It worked out then that he had deceived Comrade Stalin, deceived him.

He sat crushed and shamed, and Stalin noticed it.

"Well, Party Secretary," he said gaily, "do you understand now what these separate facts signify? Do you understand it, as a leader?"

"I have little experience as a leader," Andrei whispered, disconcerted by the significant sound of that word coming from Stalin's lips.

"Nevertheless, you are one!"

Stalin got up and began to pace the carpet. Then he went close up to Andrei.

"These facts mean this, Comrade Voronko," he said. "The birth of the Stakhanov movement immediately gave birth to its opponents, its enemies. That is how it always is. The old always stands in the way of the new. The new can win only in a struggle with the old." He glanced at the subdued Andrei with narrowed eyes. "Tell me more about the opponents of the Stakhanov movement. Who are they? Who backs them? What is their real strength? What else hampers the movement? What measures of assistance are needed?"

He did not sit down any more. He walked up and down the room with a light noiseless tread, stopping suddenly to put a new question or listen to the answer.

Andrei now decided to speak his mind fully. Before answering he rigorously searched his mind and his heart. A miracle seemed to have been worked in him—he saw things with clearer insight. Things he had formerly

thought unimportant, unworthy of consideration and which he had dismissed with annoyance, acquired a new meaning, were flooded in a new light.

His answers apparently pleased Stalin.

"There! And you say you're an inexperienced leader," he exclaimed, stopping in front of Andrei. "You've shown yourself to be a real statesman!"

"Oh, no, Joseph Vissarionovich!" Andrei cried, at once delighted and overwhelmed.

"I daresay Stakhanov did not consider himself a statesman either when he attempted the record!" Stalin laughed. "I suppose you, too, thought only of your Steep Maria?"

"Yes, of course. . ." smiled Andrei.

"But the result was a nation-wide movement. And that was no accident! The time was ripe for it. You're also a hewer, of course?" Stalin suddenly asked.

"Yes. . ."

"What education have you?"

"Only seven classes. . ."

"Only!" Stalin repeated with a smile. "I doubt whether you'd have found a single miner with a seven-year education before the Revolution. Have you been using the pneumatic hammer?"

"Yes."

"What do you think of the tool? Is it any good?"

"It's quite a decent tool, I should say."

"Isn't it out of date already?"

"Oh, no, Joseph Vissarionovich," Andrei said in surprise. "It was only recently introduced."

"That's true, but that doesn't prove anything!" Stalin laughed. "Still, it's better than the pick."

"There's no comparison!" exclaimed Andrei.

"And how are the cutting machines working?"

"We haven't any cutting machines. They're mostly used at the horizontal seams."

"And how do they work there?"

"I don't know..." Andrei admitted in confusion.

"That's too bad," Stalin said. "You're a Party man, you should be interested in everything."

"I'll find out now," Andrei said hastily. "I'll write you about it."

"Will you?" Stalin said, pursing his eyes. "Well, well, mind you keep your word! I'll be expecting your letter!" He levelled his pipe at Andrei in a mock threat.

"I promise to write you," Andrei repeated.

"And not only about the cutting machines. Generally about mechanization of mining work. We here in the Central Committee are particularly interested in that. Mechanization, the new technique, along with other factors, will enable us to eliminate the age-old contradiction between manual and intellectual labour and achieve communism. What do you think, Comrade Voronko," he asked with a twinkle in his eyes, "will we have communism in our day?"

"Our working class is firmly convinced of it!" Andrei answered excitedly.

"So am I!" smiled Stalin. "The only thing is that everyone in our country should work the Stakhanov way."

Half-turned towards the window, he relit his pipe and stood for several moments gazing thoughtfully at the Kremlin firs, which looked as though covered with starry hoar-frost.

Andrei got up from his chair. He thought it time to take his leave, but he was loath to go.

"Thank you, Joseph Vissarionovich!" he said in a low, heartfelt tone.

Stalin turned round and went up to Andrei.

"Thank *you*!" he said warmly, holding his hand out.

"Don't forget to write!" Stalin gaily reminded Andrei as he was leaving the room. "I'll be expecting your letter!"

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